

Chaos Killed the Demogorgon by thisiswhyishouldntwritefanfic

Category: Heathers (1988), Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Alternate Universe, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Canon-Typical Violence, Crossover, Drug Use, F/M, Flashbacks, Gen, Human Experimentation, Implied/Referenced Abuse, Implied/Referenced Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Implied/Referenced Suicide, Minor Character Death, Other Additional Tags to Be Added, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD

Language: English

Characters: Barbara "Barb" Holland, Bud Dean, Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jason "J. D." Dean, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lonnie Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Martin Brenner, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Veronica Sawyer, Will Byers

Relationships: Jason "J. D." Dean/Veronica Sawyer, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Joyce Byers & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Minor or Background Relationship(s)

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Summary:

Joyce Byers had her hands full with her two boys, struggling to make ends meet as a single parent. She goes from barely keeping her head above water to drowning when she has to take in her very traumatized niece.

The lawyers are jerking her around, Lonnie's after Veronica's money, and then her son goes missing.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

I find it a bit funny that I'm now writing for two things I was never intending to watch. I'm a silly person. I wasn't going to watch *Heathers* because JD killed people and then died. And I wasn't going to watch *Stranger Things* because I don't do well with horror (I have an overactive imagination that makes it so, so much worse.)

But I was sick, my friend asked me if I would screen the show for her as she's got young kids and didn't want to try it around them without an idea how scary it would be or if she'd even like it, and I decided I'd try it since I wasn't going anywhere. (I was already very deep into *Heathers* fic by then.)

And as I am wont to do, I couldn't help making a connection between roles played by the same actor, and that was a partial start, and I tried, really tried to ignore it, but I am not that good a person. The ideas nagged at me, and I found that I wasn't going to be able to ignore them even as much as I was intending to start a *Static* sequel when I finished *Blind Love*.

I wasn't willing to age the characters up or down despite the difference in years between the two settings ('83/'88) so I didn't. There was an angle to Veronica at seventeen and the older set of kids (Jonathan, Steve, Nancy, and Barb) that I wanted to explore, and I think it will be worth it. I hope, anyway. This big of an ensemble cast is scary to work with, and I probably have characterization all sorts of wrong.

September 27

“Dr. Brenner?”

He looked up from the papers in front of him, annoyed. They had a very important experiment scheduled for this afternoon. He was looking forward to seeing how much progress Eleven had made. Her abilities were improving on a daily basis, and he was rather proud of how far this child had come. He had known it would be special, known enough to take her from Terry Ives back at the beginning, and he was pleased to see his instincts validated.

Eleven would be the key to their future, and he knew it.

He did not need distractions, not now.

“What is it?”

“We have a lead on Nine. An unconfirmed sighting.”

Brenner tensed. Unconfirmed or not, Nine was far too dangerous to ignore. If there was even the slightest chance that boy was still alive, it could not be put off. “Where?”

“Sherwood, Ohio.”

“Send a team to investigate.”

“And if they confirm?”

Brenner eyed the idiot, frustration almost causing him to lose his temper. Exactly what did they think this was here? “Capture if possible.”

“Nine was psychotic. You yourself said it was unlikely he would be at all useful after that break he had and his morality—”

“We don't know that Nine can't be used if properly reeducated,” Brenner said, his irritation growing by the minute. He refused to be goaded into an outburst. The boy had escaped during that same psychotic break, and while some speculated that he had died as well,

they could not prove it. Nor could they be certain that he couldn't be reconditioned. Nine had a weakness that was easy to exploit, one he shared with Eleven. Both children were desperate for affection.

Brenner's approval had meant everything to them. It could mean that again for Nine.

"Capture him if possible. If not, eliminate him, and make sure that if anyone sees what he can do, they do not speak of it."

"Yes, Doctor."

November 3

Joyce swore she ought to have her keys tied to her wrist every night before bed or something, since no matter what she did, they always seemed to be missing in the morning when she got up, even when she swore she was setting them down somewhere that she would find them when it was time to go.

She shook her head as she left her bedroom, going down the hall. She passed by the door to the bedroom and stopped, doubling back.

"Veronica? You ready for school?"

Her niece had her back to her, staring out the window again, like she did almost every day. Joyce swallowed, her heart breaking all over again, just as it had when she'd first heard about her older sister and her husband.

True, she'd never been that close to them, and her sister had rubbed it in her nose plenty that she got out of Hawkins and had a good life when Joyce just got herself knocked up and stuck with Lonnie Byers, but that wasn't worth holding onto, not anymore.

She crossed over to the other side of the bed, putting her hand on Veronica's shoulder. "Hey, honey. How are you doing this morning?"

Veronica jerked, looking up at her, and Joyce tried not to react. In some ways, it was like seeing her own face, and somehow it never

got easier, especially as haunted as Veronica looked.

“Oh. Aunt Joyce. I... Sorry. I...”

“Don't be sorry. You've got nothing to be sorry for,” Joyce told her. “Um... Jonathan made breakfast again, and I'm not going to rush you, but I have to rush because I can't find my keys, so... I just... you're going to be okay at school today, right?”

Veronica nodded. “I'll be fine. I was just... thinking.”

“Okay. Well, remember, if you need anything, anything at all, you just let Jonathan know because he's at that school with you. He can help. I'll be working a double again, but you can call me at the store and—”

“I'll be fine,” Veronica repeated. “Thank you.”

Joyce forced a smile, knowing she didn't believe that for a second. She left the room again, hurrying into the kitchen. “Jonathan, have you seen my—Oh, thank you. You are an absolute life saver. I don't know what I'd do without you, baby.”

She took hold of his cheek and kissed him as she took the keys from him. He reddened, looking embarrassed, and she knew she was about to make things a lot worse.

“Look, sweetheart, I know this is a lot to ask of you, and you already do so much for me and you don't complain and you've raised yourself more than I ever have done anything for you, but can you please, please keep an eye on your cousin today? She's... I'm worried about her. She keeps saying she's fine, but we know she's not fine and I know you and Will have had to put up with a lot since—”

“Mom, it's fine,” Jonathan said. “I'll make sure she gets to school okay and... I'll check on her at lunch, okay?”

“Okay, thank you,” Joyce said, starting for the door. She stopped, biting back a curse. “What did I do with the number for that lawyer? I have to call him again. This is ridiculous.”

“It's taped by the phone.”

“Right,” she said, knowing she'd be completely lost without her oldest. She ran back, grabbed the note and ran for the door again. She was going to be late, and Donald would be pissed.

They really needed that damned lawyer to come through for them already.

Jonathan never talked to much of anyone at his school, and that hadn't changed after his cousin showed up, wide-eyed and out of it, staring at everything like she didn't understand anything she saw. They said she was traumatized, lucky to be alive, and it wasn't hard to believe. Her first few days here, she hadn't said much of anything, just stared at the walls a lot.

Will started spending all his time at his friends' houses, since Veronica creeped him out, which was a bit of a relief in some sense, what with them stuck sharing a room again. Still, he knew he wasn't the only one feeling the strain.

His mom was even more frazzled than before, and Veronica didn't seem to be getting any better. Jonathan was worried about all of them—his brother, his mom, and his cousin. He wasn't sure how much longer any of them would be able to hold it together, and it didn't help that the lawyer who was supposed to be helping set up whatever trust it was Veronica's parents left behind hadn't done shit about it and left them all hanging.

He hoped his mom could get through to him today and make him do something, he thought as he parked his car in the lot. It was making that noise again, and he needed to get it fixed, but he didn't have money for the parts.

He needed to work more, but his mom didn't trust Veronica with watching Will—not that he blamed her, his cousin was too spaced out half the time to know where she was and she was not capable of keeping an eye on anyone. He hadn't been able to get much of any extra shifts lately.

He walked around the car and opened the door, holding it for Veronica, who blinked again like she hadn't known where they were.

"School," he said, and she nodded, still quiet and haunted. Probably the worst part of it was how much she looked like his mom. Her hair was darker, but that was about all that was different, give or take a few years.

"Come on. I'll walk you to class."

She shook her head. "You don't have to do that."

He tried not to be too shocked that she spoke, but she'd thrown him off and he didn't actually manage to react before she had jogged away from him, heading up toward the doors.

He leaned against his car and sighed.

"Jonathan?"

He almost fell over. Fuck. Nancy Wheeler. What was she doing talking to him? They didn't speak. Their brothers were friends, but they never spoke, not anymore, and even before, when they did, it was usually about their brothers. Hawkins wasn't that big, so everyone knew each other, but that didn't make them friends, didn't even make it easy to talk to them.

Not that it had ever been easy for him to talk to Nancy. He must have fallen hard for her once he first started noticing girls and he never got over it, much as he tried.

"Hey," he said, hoping his voice sounded halfway normal.

"Hi," she said, giving him one of those Nancy smiles, ones perfect for photographs and dangerous, more powerful than she knew. Her friend was with her, Barb, and she smiled awkwardly. He figured she knew. She was quiet, she noticed things, but at least she was kind enough not to say anything. Anyone else would have made his life miserable with that knowledge. "We were just... um..."

"How is your cousin?" Barb asked, nudging Nancy with her elbow.

"Yeah, that's... we weren't sure if... everyone's kind of been giving her a lot of space, you know? I don't think any of us really know what to say to her—who knows what to say to a girl whose house blew up

and killed her parents, right? Um, but... is she doing okay?"

No, Veronica was not fucking okay, but like he could really say that. "I don't really know. She doesn't talk to me."

"Would you mind if... if we talked to her?" Nancy asked, and he was reminded just how kind she could be, even though her eyes had already wandered over toward Steve Harrington. Great.

"Um, no," Jonathan forced himself to say. "I think she might like that. Thanks."

"No problem," Barb said, taking hold of Nancy's arm and leading her away.

"You know you were a little rude back there," Barb said, and Nancy looked over at her with a frown. "Come on, don't make me spell it out. You made googly eyes at Steve Harrington while we were trying to talk to Jonathan about his cousin."

"I did not make googly eyes—"

"You so did," Barb said. "Look, it's flattering, right? He likes you. He's super popular, but your timing kind of sucks. It's not like trying to reach out to Jonathan's cousin isn't way overdue, right? I mean, we both admit we should have tried before now—"

"We've said 'hi' before," Nancy said. "And... she kind of stared through us. It was... creepy."

Barb nodded. That had been unsettling, but then again, it had been just after Veronica came to Hawkins. Everyone knew she was there because her parents were dead, and that just set everyone whispering. Gossip about her spread like wildfire, each rumor worse than the last. First she'd been in some freak accident, then she was the only survivor of a horrific fire, then she'd torched an entire town. Since she was quiet all the time and never talked to anyone, they just got worse—kids saying she was a witch or that she'd killed her parents.

It didn't help that she was cousins with the Byers or looked as much

like her aunt Joyce—Jumpy Joyce who had anxiety or June Joyce, who was supposedly loonier than a June bug. Barb had never seen it, not that she knew Mrs. Byers well, but she seemed kind and warm any time she rang Barb up at the store. Barb liked her, and she didn't think it was fair that people talked about her all the time.

This was Hawkins, though, and people didn't seem to have much to do but talk about each other.

"We're going to try again," Nancy said, almost like she needed to talk herself back into this. "That's what matters."

Barb grimaced, wondering if it was even worth them doing this if they were only doing it because they felt guilty or sorry for her or just thought they should. She doubted Veronica wanted the pity.

They walked around the building, knowing where Veronica tended to spend her mornings—away from everyone else on campus—and stopped.

"She smokes," Nancy said, frowning. "And... is she talking to herself?"

"Everyone talks to themselves," Barb said, thinking she did that more than she wanted to admit. "And just because she smokes doesn't make any of the rumors true."

"I didn't say it did. I just..." Nancy shook her head. "Forget it. It's stupid. We're just talking, right? No harm in that, even if she is smoking."

"Right," Barb said, knowing she sounded a lot more confident than she felt. She didn't do all that well with strangers—there was a reason she and Nancy had been friends since forever—and Veronica was a little intimidating no matter what.

"Veronica?" Nancy asked, approaching the other girl with a tight smile. "Hi. You're in my chemistry class, right? I'm Nancy Wheeler, and this is Barb Holland."

Veronica let out a breath, smoke coming out when she did. "Yeah. I know."

They got actual words. Neither of them was expecting that, and Barb had no idea what to do now.

"I'm pretty worried about that test," Nancy went on, trying for a semi-normal conversation. "His are always so hard, and there's a lot to learn. I made a whole set of flashcards. I—did you need someone to study with? Because we could. You and me and Barb, we could all practice for this test and it might help."

"You got any of those flashcards with you?"

"Oh, yeah." Nancy dug into her bag. "I wasn't planning on doing any studying right now, but I've been working on them all week."

"They're even color-coded," Barb said, and Nancy gave her a look. She shrugged. Her friend was a little too stressed about this test, even with her grades, which were a lot better than Barb's.

"Which polymers occur naturally?" Nancy read off the top card. "I am such a dork, right?"

"Starch and cellulose," Veronica said, and they both frowned at her.

"What?"

"The polymers. Starch and cellulose."

"Oh," Nancy said. She fidgeted for a second and then read off another. "In a molecule of CH_4 , the hydrogen atoms are spatially oriented towards the centers of—"

"Tetrahedrons."

"Okay, tell me you already took this class at your old school," Barb said, and Veronica shook her head. She took another drag of her cigarette before stubbing it out.

"No, just a freak," Veronica said, reaching into her pocket for another cigarette. "Thought everyone around here knew that."

"Hawkins is full of people with small minds," Nancy agreed. "Do you have one of those... photographic memories or something?"

“Genius IQ, supposedly,” Veronica said as she lit up the second cigarette. “They wanted to move me into high school out of the sixth grade because I was supposed to be this big genius... then we decided to chuck the idea, because I'd have trouble making friends, blah, blah, blah... And now they're dead, and I'm here, and I sure as fuck have trouble making friends. You want to know the funny thing? I used to be popular. God, I was. I was one of them. And I used waste my genius IQ on what color gloss to wear and how to fit in three keggers before curfew.”

That was a little hard to believe from the girl who'd spent the better part of a month staring off into space all the time, but then none of them had really known her before, not even from stories, since the Byers weren't friends with many people and didn't talk about things. People knew Joyce's sister married and moved far out of Hawkins, but that was about it.

“So, yeah. My life is a fucking mess,” Veronica finished. “Are you sorry you came over to talk to me yet?”

“Shockingly, no,” Barb told her because she found Veronica strangely fascinating, like a train wreck you couldn't look away from. She wasn't sure Nancy understood, but then Nancy was on the cusp of breaking down that social barrier that would put her in the in crowd, since King Steve was interested in her. Barb knew she was about to get left behind.

She didn't know if reaching out to Veronica would make it any better, but at least she wouldn't be alone in being miserable.

2. Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

Joyce tries to talk to the lawyer, and Veronica continues to cope badly.

Notes for the Chapter:

I did honestly consider telling this story straight from September on, but then it would have been all about the Heathers sides of things, almost all about Veronica, and I thought that was a little unfair. The show uses flashbacks, so I think it should work out well, and I love flashbacks, I really do.

And... two chapters at once because nervous me.

September 26

“Everything's set with the school tomorrow, Dad,” Bud said, sitting down on the couch with a beer. He held one out, but the boy made no move to take it. He shrugged, tipping it to his own lips. Kid didn't know what a good beer was, that didn't bother him. More for him, then, and who knew what the little bastard would do if he ever did have any?

Nothing good, that was for damned sure.

“There's still time, though. Can call them back and pull you out,” Bud went on, taking another sip as he studied the kid. No, he'd bet good money the little freak wouldn't last a day. He almost wished he could be there to see it. The show would be entertaining. It always was with this one.

The boy shook his head.

“If that's the way you want it, Dad.”

The kid rolled his eyes. "That's not funny, son."

Bud just laughed. The little brat had a tendency to give him orders, leading to their lopsided arrangement, but then he'd gotten a few benefits out of the deal. He looked the kid over. Yeah, he was still scrawny, not much to look at, and those bullies were going to have a field day with him tomorrow. It would be worth it, though. Put the kid in his place, get him over the idea he'd ever be normal, make him a little more desperate for what Bud had to offer, all in one fell swoop.

He was actually a bit excited for tomorrow.

He finished his beer, ready for another. He grabbed the other one off the table, popping off the lid. "You know the rules, right?"

"Yes."

"List 'em off."

"No talking back to the teachers. No starting fights. Answer questions but only when called on. Don't say anything about... about before."

Bud looked at him. "You don't sound old enough for school, Dad."

"Fuck you," the kid said, and Bud just smiled at him until the boy fidgeted.

"Don't overlook the most important thing. If you really think you're going to do this, you have to remember rule one, but I think you left it out on purpose. You planning on getting yourself caught and locked away for good like the freak you are?"

The kid glared at him. "No."

"Then what's the rule?"

"No using any weird powers."

Bud nodded. That was the one. For all the boy was a thin streak of nothing, he was dangerous as hell. That was the only reason he kept the kid around. He didn't need a drain on his finances or his time, but

this kid... this was something to possess. Bud knew his hold on him was thin, liable to snap if he pushed the boy the wrong way, though he tested those boundaries daily, which was half the reason he'd agreed to this little school experiment.

Once the boy got a taste of high school, he'd stop complaining about Bud's nomadic life and wanting to be normal.

"Rule only applies outside of the house," Bud said, pointing his beer toward the fireplace. "Do something about that."

"No."

"Oh, come on," Bud said, giving him a pleading look. "Please? For me? Because you love me?"

"I hate you," the kid said, and Bud knew he wasn't entirely lying about that. The boy had come with him because he had little other choice, though he wanted approval, craved it like a kid half his age. Mental retard with superpowers.

Perfect, really. Made him easier to use.

"Do it."

The kid closed his eyes, lifted his hand, and then they had a nice roaring fire in front of them.

"Nice work," Bud said. "Now come here."

November 3

"No, I understand that, but you said last month it shouldn't take that long to arrange this," Joyce said, talking into the phone at the register. Hopper had to figure that she was the only one in the store today, like she was most days, Donald off to the next town over's golf course, which was shit in Jim's opinion, but you know, man had to have his hobbies, and why did he need to work when he had Joyce willing to slave away just to keep her family afloat?

She held up a hand, motioning for Hop to wait, and he just shrugged. He wasn't in any hurry, even if he was on duty. This was Hawkins, and he hadn't had anything real to do since he took this job.

“Are you telling me you can't—look, I am not asking for the whole settlement right now, but you have to understand—she lost everything when her parents died. Everything. That house is gone. No clothes, no toys, nothing. And yes, I know she's too old for toys, but come on. She has needs, needs you told me that trust would provide for, and yet I am scraping together pennies to make sure she has dinner every night. There has to be something else you can do,” Joyce hissed into the phone, her cheeks going red as she spoke. “No, not tomorrow. Now. I am sick of you putting me off and telling me it takes time. You're never in your office when I call—this is the first time I've gotten a hold of you in weeks, and you're going to tell me I need to be patient? Patient, when my niece is staring at walls and not talking to anyone? She needs help. She needs—fix this. Now. Or I will get a different lawyer, I swear to God, and I will sue you for obstruction. Or something.”

She slammed the phone down and turned back, shaking a little. She swallowed. “Um... Sorry. It's normally slow around now and my sister's lawyer's been ducking my calls and—”

“Joyce, you don't have to apologize to me,” Hop told her. He knew the shop was dead this time. That was the only reason he'd bothered coming in. He wasn't feeling like being social, though at the moment, he'd like to find that lawyer and punch him out for her. What a dick. Everyone knew Joyce's niece was fucked up by what happened to her parents, and this guy was jerking Joyce around over the insurance money?

He deserved to get clocked.

“Let me just ring you up—”

“Only if you take a minute and a few of those,” he said, nudging the Camels with his hand. He knew what she liked, and she could use one right about now. “Come on. I know Donald's off on the green today, and if anyone asks, this is official police business.”

She snorted, but she grabbed the pack off the counter and followed him to the front of the store. He held the door open for her and waved her over to the bench by the window. She sat down, opening the pack he'd just forgotten to pay for—he'd slip an extra bill in to her when he left, though she probably would try and give it back to him later.

She had her pride, Joyce did, and he admired her for it, even if it was harder than hell to watch her run herself into the ground like she was.

“How much did you hear?” Joyce asked, lighting up. “And don't say nothing. I know you heard plenty. It would have been a damned show if the store was busy.”

It would have, more fuel for the gossip fires that seemed to surround Joyce. He shrugged, not really sure what to say. He heard she needed help, but if he said anything close to that, she'd tell him to fuck off and go back inside. “Not everything.”

“I don't need charity.”

“I never said I was offering any,” he reminded her, because for one, he was too much of a mess to give much, and for two, he knew she would never take it.

“I just...”

“No, I get it,” he said. “You have your hands full feeding the three of you, and all of a sudden, there's someone else you're responsible for, and you've got to find some way of making that money that barely stretched over the three of you cover four.”

Joyce looked out in the distance. “We were fine, before. Well... managing. We were okay. We were. It wasn't easy, but it was working.”

Hop had his suspicions she was a little too dependent on her oldest, but he wasn't about to voice that, not to her. “None of this is your fault, you know. It's not that girl's, either.”

“No, it's not her fault,” Joyce said, running a hand over her face. “She

didn't ask for it, and I know if she was in a better state, she'd help. She's not... I never knew her well, but when she was younger she was... she was a good kid. Smart. Better than my sister deserved, I remember thinking. God, listen to me.”

“Hey, just because she died doesn't make what she did to you any easier. It just means you'll never hear her say she was sorry and people think it ends with death. It doesn't.”

She nodded, thankfully not getting into why he knew so much about that. “I know. I just... That girl... she sits in Will's room all day, staring at the walls. That's all she does outside of school. The teachers say she does her assignments, but she won't talk to me. She doesn't talk to Jonathan or Will—not that Will has been giving her much of a chance—he's always off at his friends, so angry that he had to lose his space to her, but it's not like I could have her share with one of them. Maybe I should have taken the couch. I'd build on a damned room if I could just get that lawyer to come through with the money. I don't want a fortune, but she had nothing when she came to us. Everything went with the house, and she didn't even come to us with the clothes on her back—those weren't hers.”

Hop nodded. He'd heard as much. They all had. The girl should have died with her parents, that was the one consistent part of all the rumors. He tried not to listen, but he worked with Flo and a couple of officers who had way too much time on their hands. Speculation was everywhere in Hawkins, and Joyce had been the brunt of it for years before her traumatized niece ended up in her lap.

“You want to know what the best part is, though?” Joyce asked, stubbing out the cigarette and reaching for another. “Lonnie called. Says he wants to see the boys this weekend.”

“That's a change. When was the last time he was around?”

“Six months ago he was supposed to show up for Will's birthday and didn't.”

That sounded a lot like Lonnie, didn't surprise Hop one damned bit. “And now he's had a change of heart, wants to make up for lost time?”

She snorted. “He doesn't want to see the boys, Hop. He's sniffing around after Veronica's trust fund that I don't even have.”

“If he starts hassling you, give me a call. I'll gladly run him out of town.”

She gave him a look. “I do not need you fighting my battles for me.”

“Who said I was? I've been itching for an excuse to kick his ass since we were in high school.”

“Yeah, you have,” she agreed. She stood, taking a deep breath. “Look, don't tell anyone about this. I don't—I don't want them pitying me or talking about me. I can handle this.”

He doubted that, but he knew what battles to pick with Joyce, and this wasn't one of them. He'd have to figure out a way around her if he wanted to be of any help at all, and he wasn't sure he did. He'd been doing a good job of keeping his distance before today, even after hearing about her niece going through hell only to be dumped in Hawkins.

Not that either of them really wanted the reminder of the night the girl had run off into the woods and scared the shit out of everyone.

“If he tries anything or you need anything, you let me know, okay?”

Joyce blinked. “Hop, I told you. I can handle this.”

She couldn't, it was all over her—she was exhausted and worried, probably hadn't slept decently since before that girl showed up in her life—and he wanted to shake some sense into her, but that never worked with Joyce.

“Fine, but you know, Flo went and baked me one of those god awful vegetable casseroles, and you know I ain't gonna eat that, so if you and your houseful of urchins are at all interested in it, it'll save you the trouble of cooking for a night.”

Joyce rolled her eyes. “That was pathetic, Hop.”

“You know me, Joyce. I aim to please.”

She laughed, and he figured he'd done at least a little good here today.

Veronica leaned against the wall, listening to the kids all around her. High school didn't even seem real anymore. They thought about grades and college and dating and the next game, and all she could see was fire, everywhere, burning every last one of them to dust.

She was losing it. She knew that. Ever since she woke up in the hospital after the accident, her mind had only been half there. She couldn't connect that life before to the one now, couldn't fit the pieces that were missing between here and there in a way that made sense.

"Monday morning, you're history... I'll tell everyone about tonight. Transfer to Washington. Transfer to Jefferson. No one at Westerburg's gonna let you play their reindeer games."

She shivered, running her hands over her arms. How did so much go so wrong in one night?

She caught the popular girls staring at her and laughing. Carol and Nicole were the worst with the rumors about her. She'd heard them talking, knew they said she was a witch who'd burned her parents alive and was fooling around with her weirdo cousin in some freakish hillbilly orgy—oh, and Jonathan wasn't just her cousin, he was secretly her twin or something because Veronica looked too much like her aunt to just be a niece.

She'd thought Sherwood was bad, but she'd gladly go back to the days of helping Heather Duke puke up her lunch or caving into whatever Heather Chandler was bullying her into if it meant her parents were alive.

Not that her social standing would be any better back there. She'd screwed that up good at the Remington party.

"Ignore them."

Veronica almost jumped out of her skin. "Fuck. You scared me."

The redhead from earlier gave her a thin smile. "Sorry. I didn't mean to sneak up on you. Just... no one really cares what Carol or Nicole thinks."

People did, though, and that was the problem. Barb lied to herself the way Veronica used to, telling herself it didn't matter that she wasn't popular or that she could keep both worlds and have Betty for a friend if she got in with the Heathers. That was where Nancy was now, right on the verge of being a Heather, and like Betty, Barb would be left behind.

She could see all of it, and she was only half here.

"If this is another attempt to get me to study, I'm going to pass. I could care less what grades I get."

"Nancy sees college as her way out of Hawkins," Barb said. "I think that's why she's so obsessed with doing well. She doesn't want to get stuck here."

"Makes sense. This town is a shithole."

Barb looked at her. "You don't talk for a month and suddenly every word out of you is tough and full of profanity. You think maybe you're compensating for something?"

"No one wants to hear what I have to say. I'm insane, just like my aunt. Only my aunt didn't see a fiery inferno to have an excuse for being depressed and moody. My aunt's just some pathetic small town girl who got herself knocked up by the wrong man, a tale as old as fucking time."

Veronica put a hand to her head. "I don't... I don't mean that. I don't..."

Some days were a hell of a lot worse. Just because today she had a voice didn't make it better. Nothing changed what she'd seen that night, what she'd done. She had to live with that, and she didn't know how, and staying silent was somehow better than lashing out at everyone around her, at people who were decent and had no idea the kind of monster she really was.

“Hey,” Barb said, touching her arm. “It's okay. It'll be okay.”

Only Veronica knew it wasn't, and it never would be.

3. Chapter 3

Summary for the Chapter:

Veronica's school day gets worse.

September 27

He hated when Bud was right, but school was just as fucking awful as the man had said it would be every time he mentioned it. Bud would love it, knowing just how much he despised this place, but he wasn't going to tell him, even if he'd only made it to lunch and already wanted to burn the whole place down, keep the flames going higher and higher until there was nothing left of this hellhole.

He wished he'd done that to the lab. He should have.

"You can do it, Nine," Papa said in his ear, leaning close and making him almost feel wanted. "I know you can. It's just a little candle."

He pulled himself deeper into his coat, wanting to disappear again, but he couldn't do that here. He could leave, he supposed, but that meant admitting Bud was right, and then he'd have to pay for losing the bet and he didn't want to pay Bud's price. He never did. Bud's games were never as fun as he said they would be.

Bud wasn't that much different from Papa, all things considered, though he supposedly could go where he wanted and do what he pleased most of the time. Bud always told him he wouldn't want a normal family and his was better because there was no bitchy woman to screw things up—she'd died in a library and was best forgotten—and because Bud didn't force him to act like some dads did.

Then Bud would insist he was doing stuff like a real dad and he should want it because he did, but he didn't and it felt wrong but he couldn't complain because Bud could turn him back over to Papa any

time he wanted or give him away to other bad men.

Bud was better than them.

Mostly.

He pulled on his jacket again, stopping when he saw the girl. Oh, he'd seen girls before, plenty of times, there were even some at the lab, but none that looked like her. He'd seen doctors before, scientists, older women, but they were older and something about thinking they were pretty didn't feel right, not that the guards teasing him about it made it any better, and when they started saying other stuff he'd lit them on fire and gotten in even more trouble for it.

He took a breath, forcing the memories away. They weren't here. He was fine.

And she was still beautiful. She was with three other girls, all of them pretty, but he could care less about them. They weren't the same. There was something about that one, something that made him think she'd understand about the fires and all the dead bodies he'd left behind.

No. Bud said no one would, no one but him, and he had to keep that to himself.

She was looking back at him, staring long enough to bump into someone's table, and he tried not to laugh as she did. He wondered if the darkness was an illusion, something from her clothes and hair, or if that thing he thought he saw in her was real.

Couldn't be real. He knew that there were others, others with numbers, but they weren't like him. They were better than him. He was a mess, a failure. No good.

He closed his eyes, willing the memories not to come. They were bad, all of them bad, and he couldn't afford to remember the pain, not here.

"Hello, Jason Dean."

He opened his eyes, needing a minute to remember that was the

name Bud had given him. Dean like Bud's own. He didn't know why Jason. He didn't like it, though.

"Greetings and salutations," he said, having liked both those words since he first heard them even if Bud thought they make him sound like the freak he was. "Are you a Heather?"

"No, I'm a Veronica... Veronica Sawyer." She fidgeted, her arms wrapped around a clipboard, and he wondered why she was even talking to him. "This may seem like a really stupid question..."

Since he'd gotten free of the lab, he'd asked a lot of questions. He needed to learn, to seem less of a freak. "There are no stupid questions."

"You inherit five million dollars the same day aliens land on the earth and say they're gonna blow it up in two days. What do you do?"

"That's the stupidest question I've ever heard," he decided, since it had no use or point, nothing to teach. He couldn't learn from it, so he wouldn't ask it. She was still watching him like she expected an answer, though, so he had to have one. "I'd use my powers to burn the aliens to hell and spend the money however I damn well pleased."

His answer made her smile, even if it was the wrong thing to say. "Powers, huh? How very."

That was a new one to him, and he almost asked her about it, but the other girl took her by the arm, pulling on it. "Come on, Veronica."

Her eyes didn't leave him, them or her smile. "Later."

She could make this high school thing worth doing. He could stick around if it meant seeing her. And not letting Bud be right. "Definitely."

He watched her go, a new sense of accomplishment washing over him. That felt good. Most of the stuff in his life did not feel even remotely pleasant, and he knew talking like that to anyone back at the lab would have meant punishment. It might even mean that with Bud.

Technically, he broke a rule.

Two boys in matching jackets came over to his table, leaning over it. One of them stabbed his fingers into the leftovers of his disgusting lunch. "You gonna eat this?"

He hadn't planned on it. He'd had better food in the lab, and he swore that shit was going to kill him, but he couldn't tell these boys that.

"What did your boyfriend say when you told him you were moving to Sherwood, Ohio?"

He frowned. Boyfriend. That was a new one. He'd heard it before, but only in terms of men and women on television and Bud would always change the channel or put on one of his videos of explosions. He didn't have a boyfriend. He didn't have any friends. Bud didn't count.

"Answer him, dick."

That he knew. Bud liked to talk about his dick a lot. It made him uncomfortable, but then a lot of what Bud did made him feel sick. Bud wasn't a good man, just... not quite as bad as the lab.

"Hey, Ram, doesn't this cafeteria have a 'no fags allowed' rule?"

The one called Ram was thinking about it. So was he. Fag. He knew that word. He knew what it meant, and he knew what sex like that was like, but he didn't like it. It hurt. They shouldn't even know about that, that he'd had to do that. He hated them for it.

He wanted to burn them. Both of them, until there was nothing left.

He forced himself not to, trying to think of something Bud might say and twist it for this situation. "They seem to have an open door policy for assholes, though, don't they?"

"What did you say, dickhead?"

He started to repeat himself, but that only made them madder. The one not called Ram yanked him up from the table and they both pushed him back into the wall behind them. He hit hard, wincing as

the pain went through his body again, so damned familiar.

“Try repeating it now,” Ram said, grinning, his hand in a fist and he knew if he spoke he'd get hit. He knew this. He knew it too well.

White walls at his back, men towering over him. Pain. Every kind of it they could think of, things snapped and torn and cut and left to fester alone in the dark where he was supposed to learn his lesson. Papa's endless disapproval.

“Yeah, we thought as much, pussy,” the other one said, sneering at him. He tried to push them off, desperate as they laughed, and that was too much, the laughter, the way the guards used to laugh or the others, the ones who taught him that word and he left burning and he did it, setting their underwear on fire first, the flames spreading across their clothes.

They jumped back, screaming, and he ran.

November 3

Barb Holland, Jonathan thought, should be some kind of candidate for sainthood or something. He didn't know how she'd done it, but she'd gotten Veronica talking. Really talking. He snapped another photo from across the schoolyard, knowing others would think he was weird, but Veronica was so skittish he knew he didn't dare film her up close, and this did actually fulfill his promise to his mom to check on his cousin.

His mom wouldn't be thrilled to know Veronica smoked, and since the girl barely left the house, she had to have stolen them out of his mom's pack.

That wasn't all that surprising, since his mom had noticed the other day she was going through them faster than usual and blamed it on the lawyer and the stress. He'd told her she should try and cut back, and she'd nodded in that distracted way of hers and pretty much ignored him.

He was going to confront his cousin about the smoking. She couldn't go on like that. Not that his mom would be thrilled about it—she'd flipped out when she caught him trying it that once in the bathroom at the house—but at least they'd have an explanation.

Veronica would probably get away with it. Jonathan tried not to be mad about it, but how could he not? She'd come in, forced Will out of his room—whether she even realized that or not—and then did nothing around the house or anywhere, just lived off his cooking and his mom's hand-me-downs. Now she was stealing cigarettes and talking to Barb like she was fine when she was freaking everyone out and making them worry about her.

He lifted the camera, taking another photo to show his mom that his cousin was a lot better off than any of them thought, but just as she seemed to be laughing she wasn't. The line of a tear would probably be visible on her face when he developed it, and Barb was trying to comfort her.

Damn it, Jonathan felt like crap for doubting her.

Something rustled behind him, and he turned, looking around. He was usually the only one who sat around out here, a loner and an outcast, a Byers, and no one made any effort to talk to him like they did his cousin.

Still, as he turned back to look at the girls again, he couldn't shake the feeling he was being watched. He'd felt it a few times at the house, too, that there were eyes on him when he went out to work on the car or when he had to grab something from the shed.

He'd blamed that sense on Veronica before, but it was definitely not her this time, as she was currently running off from Barb, who looked like she'd kicked a puppy or something.

Damn, had Veronica said something to upset her?

Or was his cousin just being... his cousin?

He shook his head, putting his camera down and making his way back into the school. Lunch was almost over, and he'd have the rest

of the afternoon to figure out what he was going to say to Veronica when he drove her home.

When he reached the door, he found himself looking back to see if someone was there.

Nancy stopped at the sink, washing her hands and taking a look in the mirror. She supposed she looked fine. Not good enough to please her, not when her mind couldn't seem to stay on her classes and not on Steve Harrington, but okay. Too thin, really, if she was honest about it, because what guy wanted someone who had no chest or anything else to speak of? She was a twig, and while she didn't want to be fat, at least Barb had some curves.

Veronica had curves.

God, listen to her. Nancy was being a complete moron.

She turned off the water and went to dry her hands, and that was when she heard it. Something scuffling in the other stall. She'd sworn the room was empty when she came in, but someone had to be in here.

She frowned, trying to peek under the door, but that she didn't see anyone. She tried the door, and it didn't budge. Okay, definitely locked. Weird.

"Hello?"

"Go away."

Veronica. Now that she'd heard that voice, she knew she'd never forget it.

"It's Nancy," she said, though Veronica probably knew that. "Are you... I... Are you okay in there?"

That was a stupid question, and she knew it even before Veronica snorted. Nancy looked at the door and weighed her options. Even in the girls' room, crawling under the floor was gross, but if she used that little slot on the outside of the door, she could probably get it

open. She took a quarter out of her pocket and used it, turning the little circle and unlocking it. She opened it to see Veronica sitting down on the closed lid of the toilet, her knees up against her chest.

“Hey,” Nancy said, feeling like she did when Mike was upset—worried, wanting to help, and knowing she probably couldn’t.

“It’s nothing. It was stupid. I’m fine. You can stop making me your charity project.”

“You’re not fine, and I doubt it was stupid.”

“Oh, it was,” Veronica said, her voice muffled in her legs. “Barb started talking about you two shopping and she said I could come along, and for some damned reason, that made me tear up and run away like a fucking coward.”

It was really sweet of Barb to invite her, and Nancy wished she’d thought of it, but Barb would always be the better of the two of them at that stuff. “It’s okay. You’re still welcome to come and—”

“No.”

“Veronica, really, this isn’t—”

“I went shopping with my friends the day before. We cut third period and went to find me a dress Heather would approve of for the Remington party. Took fucking forever. I had to look good but not too good, not good enough to challenge her. I hated every minute of it, but I smiled and put it on for the party.”

“Was that... the night they died?”

Veronica lifted her head. “The Remington jerks? Oh, no. They’re still alive. They didn’t see anything. Not a thing.”

Nancy frowned. That didn’t make sense. “I meant—”

“You know how everyone says I look like my aunt?”

“Yeah, I do. I mean, it’s kind of hard to miss, actually. You’re like... a younger sister or twin or something in some ways. Better hair,

though. Your aunt needs a few pointers there.”

Veronica managed the ghost of a smile. “I’m lucky, though. Her clothes fit. All of mine are gone, and there’s no money, but her clothes fit. So while I’m insane and got everyone killed, at least her clothes fit.”

Oh, shit. Nancy understood now. Veronica couldn’t go shopping because the Byers were completely broke. The jokes everyone made about how much she looked like a younger version of her aunt—right down to the clothes—they didn’t get it at all. Those were Joyce’s clothes.

“I used up all the cigarettes, and I can’t do this,” Veronica said in a smaller voice. “I wasn’t going to say any of that to you.”

Nancy didn’t doubt that for a second. “You want me to call your aunt?”

“No. She can’t leave work.”

“I could get Jonathan—”

“No.”

“I can—”

“I’ll be fine. Just go.”

“I know you’re smoking Mom’s cigarettes.”

Veronica didn’t look over at Jonathan. “Did Nancy Wheeler tell you that?”

“What? Nancy and I don’t talk,” he said, flustered, and were she less depressed, she probably would have teased him. Today it had all gone to shit when it should have been getting better. She had people talking to her despite her worst bitch act and her near meltdowns, but she’d still fucked up and knew it. “I don’t—I saw you, okay? And I know that if you have cigarettes, they’ve got to be Mom’s.”

"I used to buy my own. You can save the lecture. It's not something that started here."

"And, what, you drink, too?"

"No. I puke at a little beer and can't handle anything stronger," she admitted, aware of his eyes on her. "You didn't know me before. I was fucking Carol, okay? I was the popular girl with the popular friends. I spent too much money on clothes and lip gloss and corn nuts. And now... Well..."

"You didn't talk for a month."

"And you think I was faking it?" Veronica asked, tapping on the window. "What am I supposed to say, Jonathan? All I want to do is scream. This isn't my life, it's not my world, it's my punishment, it's what I deserve but I want it to stop and I can't have that and—fuck." She banged her head against the window and sighed. "I am crazy. That's not an act."

"Yeah, well, that stuff seems to run in this family. Mom's Aunt Darlene—"

"Oh, God," Veronica whispered. "I swear she measured me for a coffin when I was eight."

"You, too? I thought that was just me."

She looked over at him, managing a smile, the first genuine one she'd ever shared with Jonathan, and he smiled back at her, reaching for her hand.

"I just... I guess I wanted to say that you can talk to us, too, you know."

She snorted. "Will hates me, and your mom sees herself in me and is scared of it. I think it takes her back, you know? To when our grandparents died? That's my best guess. I don't know her that well. My mom... well, she didn't talk about Hawkins much. Only a few snide remarks about how glad she was she was away from here while she ate pâté and put on airs and..."

Veronica rolled down the window, desperate for air, wanting to jump out of it she felt so trapped and stuck and what the hell was with her mouth today? Why did she keep saying stuff she shouldn't?

"Hey, it's okay. Calm down," Jonathan said. "You need me to pull over and stop for a bit?"

"No. No, just get us back to the house, okay? Please?"

He nodded, speeding up even though everyone said not to on the driveway into their house. He slowed back down when they got closer and parked. "Hold on a second, okay? I think you should wait in the car."

"No," she said, yanking the door open. She wanted to get inside and bar herself in the room where she was alone and didn't have to face anyone, just that window. She needed to be where she couldn't hurt anyone else, couldn't say anything else stupid.

Jonathan jogged up after her, catching her arm. "You don't want to go in now. Trust me. Please. Just stay here."

"What's wrong with you?"

The door to the house opened before he could answer, and a man stepped out, beer in hand and lopsided smile on his face. "Damn, Joyce. You look good. Like the hair."

"I'm not—"

"Come here. Give your husband a bit of love," he said, grabbing hold of her, and she shrieked, squirming in his hold and hitting him, trying to get free. He was going to take her away, to hurt her like they'd hurt her. She couldn't let him do that.

"Get off me! Get the fuck off! Get... off..."

She heard Jonathan yelling and someone was shoving and she fell, hitting the porch and just sitting there, shuddering. She was alone and cold and swore she smelled fire.

4. Chapter 4

Summary for the Chapter:

Things go badly in various houses.

Notes for the Chapter:

This one is... much longer. I thought maybe I needed more of the early events to explain a few things, and then I wanted to hit a certain point by the end of this chapter, and it kind of got... big. Hopefully that's good and not bad, and admittedly the scene at the Wheeler house is not my favorite, but I wanted more characters to make an appearance and canon does have some animosity between siblings, so... I left it as is.

September 27

He couldn't go back to the house.

Bud would be mad. He'd be so angry, and he knew it would be bad, worse in some ways than when Papa was disappointed in him. Bud had put his name on him, had called him his, and he'd fucked up badly. He wasn't supposed to use his powers, not here. Not where people could see.

He was bad about it, though, always used his ability to light his cigarettes.

He took a drag and let out a breath, closing his eyes and leaning against the building. He liked convenience stores. The first time he got free of the lab, he'd found one, and he'd spent hours in it, looking around at all the sights, eating everything he felt like trying until he got sick. He found a lot he liked, a lot he hated, and more he wanted to try as soon as his stomach was better.

They'd been very mad when they found him and ran him off, but he still came back to them whenever he needed to feel... safe. He knew that he wasn't safe here, not safe anywhere, but he felt better inside, watching the wheel burn turbo dogs or churn slushies.

He loved slushies. They were his all time favorite. Nothing was better than them. He spent almost all the money Bud gave him on them.

Them and cigarettes. He'd liked watching the sticks burn first, and he later saw their real purpose, and once he'd figured that out, he decided he liked it. Bud didn't, but that just made it more appealing to him. He did plenty of stuff to make Bud mad, but the mad he'd be after what he'd done at the school was different from the mad Bud got when he did stupid shit like smoke and mouth off.

This would hurt.

Unless he killed Bud.

He could. He knew that. He just... Bud had helped him when others didn't, had given him money for food and clothes and other stuff. He let him do what he wanted most of the time. He didn't make him do experiments he was sure to fail. He didn't beat him and lock him a room or use cattle prods on him until he was unconscious.

He shuddered, deciding he wanted another slushie. The cigarette hadn't worked. He needed more, and it was getting dark. They'd want him to leave, and he knew he had nowhere to go. He couldn't face Bud, not after what he'd done. His own words had trapped him, that stupid bet he'd agreed to with Bud, and now that he'd lost... He couldn't go back, even if he knew that people were supposed to honor their debts and their promises.

Fuck that. He'd never known anyone who kept any promise except the ones that hurt him.

He went into the shop, browsing around the chips. He picked up a bag and considered it. He was going to have to worry about money again if he didn't go back to Bud, and there would be other people who wanted things he didn't want to give for the money and the food.

He heard the bell and looked back to watch the other customer coming in. No. Not her. What was she doing here? He'd figured he'd never see her again, since he had to run again.

She went over to the other rack, not even seeing him. He watched her pick up a package of corn nuts and realized he'd moved toward her without thinking about it.

"Are you gonna pull a super-chug with that?"

"No, but if you're nice, I'll let you buy me a slushie," she said, flashing him a smile that made his stomach churn for reasons he couldn't understand. "I see you know your convenience-speak pretty well."

"Yeah, well..." He searched for an explanation she'd believe. "I've been moved around all my life... Dallas, Baton Rouge, Vegas... Sherwood, Ohio. There's always been a Snappy Snack Shack. Any town, any time: pop a ham-and-cheese in the microwave, and feast on a turbo dog. Keeps me sane."

He didn't mention that half the time he broke in and didn't pay for anything and many of those towns were places he'd been when running from the lab and before Bud found him. Bud forced him to move around, too. Said it was better that way and that he'd like it, but he didn't.

He didn't know what life he'd like to live, but it never seemed to be the one he had.

"That thing you pulled in the caf today was pretty severe. They don't even know how you did it."

He tried not to react. Was she asking about his powers? He had told her about them, like an idiot. Bragged, even, and he knew better than that. Bud had taught him that. So had others before him. "Yeah, well, the extreme always seems to make an impression."

He was thinking she liked that impression. He hadn't scared her. Bud told him people would be scared. He knew the guards at the lab were. Once he'd gotten the fire under control, they were all scared of

him, so scared they hurt him more.

“Did you say a cherry or Coke slushie?” He didn't know why he was asking, since she should leave him alone and run far from him. Everyone did in the end. He was a monster.

“I didn't...” She trailed off, chewing on a piece of red licorice and making him want to touch her. To see what her mouth was like. That sounded weird, didn't it? He was a freak. “Cherry.”

He went over to the machine, turning the handle and filling a cup for her. He liked watching it come out of the machine. It entertained him like fire did. He could watch things burn all day. He held it out to her when he was done, and she grinned at him.

She was not scared of him. Not a bit. How was that even possible?

“Are you going to get one?”

He shook his head. He'd get one later. He couldn't stop staring at her right now, and his would just melt and be disgusting by the time he actually drank it.

He paid for the drink and walked her out, holding the door for her like he'd seen in movies. She kept smiling at him, and he didn't know what to do. He was just some freak grown in a lab, and she shouldn't like him, but she did.

“This yours?” she asked, looking at the motorcycle parked by the door. “Great bike.”

It could have been. Bud said he'd get him one if he behaved. That was part of the bet, the one he hadn't won and would have to pay for if he went home.

He didn't want to pay.

“You like it? Could have been a perk from the construction company.”

Maybe he could earn it another way.

“Bringing every State to a higher state,” she said. “Jason Dean... Your dad's 'Big Bud Dean Construction?' Must be rough moving place to place.”

He dug into his pocket for a cigarette, lighting it with his ability but covering it with his hands. “Everybody's life's got static. Is your life perfect?”

“Oh, yeah, I'm on my way to a party at Remington University,” she said, and the girl in the car honked her horn loudly. Veronica looked over and back to him with a grimace. “No, my life's not perfect... I don't really like my friends.”

He glanced toward the car. He thought he'd like to burn that girl. She reminded him of Papa somehow, and he didn't think Veronica should be around her. “I don't really like your friends, either.”

“Well, it's just like, they're people I work with and our job is being popular and shit.”

And he thought Bud's job was bad. “Maybe it's time to take a vacation.”

She looked at him like maybe if he asked her to, she'd run with him. He was about to, but then she went to the car, leaving him standing there, alone, tempted to set the whole store on fire.

“I almost figured you turned coward on me,” Bud said, leaning against the doorway. He looked up from the cage, swallowing. “Or did you figure I wouldn't know about it?”

He cradled the hamster in his hands, almost regretting his decision to come back. He wasn't sure if he should leave with Slushie—*fucking stupid name for a furry rat, but I suppose you're just a freak from a lab so what would you know?*—or if maybe he could make himself stomach Bud's terms so he could stay close to Veronica. She was special, and he found it hard to walk away from her, to think about anything but her.

He knew it wasn't good, but she hadn't seemed upset that he'd burned

those kids, and who else wouldn't be mad or scared? Everyone always was. They didn't like his fires. Not even Bud did, and Bud was... almost understanding.

"Yeah, no, they think you're deranged. You've been suspended, and I doubt they'll take you back. Those kids ended up in the hospital."

"Don't care."

"Of course you don't. Your idea of humanity is warped as fuck, kid, and anyone who pisses you off gets extra crispy," Bud said. "Normally that shit doesn't bother me, but this is different. Those kids have rich parents who put pressure on the school and the cops. They've been by to see me."

He swallowed. "They want to throw you in jail, too? Or just me?"

"Just you. I told them the truth. I don't have any kids. Told them to look it up if they didn't believe me. They weren't happy, but since you don't exist, officially, there's not a lot they can do."

"You're mad."

"I told you school was no place for you, but you insisted. And then you managed to fuck it up before the day was even half over. What the hell were you thinking?"

"They hurt me."

"Bullshit. No one gets close to you, and you know it. You set them on fire before they could."

That wasn't what happened. He'd been afraid, and he hadn't meant to, but those boys were going to do what those awful men had done, and he couldn't let them.

"Please."

"Please, what?" Bud demanded, coming over to him. "Do you have any idea the kind of trouble you've caused us both? The shit you've brought down on our heads? Those people you're so scared of, that man that did all that to you, he could be on his way here right now."

And if those cops decide to come back and arrest you because you set kids on fire, I can't stop them. You exposed yourself. You're going to have to pay for it."

He flinched. "I'll go. I just wanted... wanted the hamster."

"You wanted that rat?" Bud demanded, grabbing hold of him. "After all I've done for you, everything I gave you and bought you and would have done for you—"

"You had a price. You wanted things from me just like they did. Don't pretend you didn't. You lied and pretended you were nice and better than them, but you were the same."

Bud was about to say something else when the doorbell rang. "Fuck. That's probably more of your mess come down on us."

He shoved him away. "Don't say anything. Don't do anything. Stay here. I'll deal with this. And then I'll deal with you."

He nodded, watching Bud go to the door. In his hands, the hamster trembled, and he shuddered. Bud was very angry, and honoring his word would hurt so much if Bud even let him. He should leave. Bud had money here, though, and if he was smart, he'd take it first.

He started for Bud's room when he heard the gunshot.

Bud had guns. He knew he did, but even if he did, that wasn't Bud who'd fired. Bud was dead. The men from the lab. They were here. They'd found Bud. Killed him.

He shoved the hamster in his pocket and held out a hand, sending the flames through the entire house, fusing all the doors and windows in place to keep the bad men here. They're here, and they'd die. He wouldn't be sorry about that.

He was sorry because he wasn't sure the hamster could firewalk with him, but he wasn't sorry if all of them died.

He wasn't even that sorry about Bud.

He was a freak grown in a lab. And he walked through the fire

unscathed.

Dear Diary, I want to kill, and you have to believe it's for more than just selfish reasons, more than just a spoke in my menstrual cycle. You have to believe me.

Veronica felt like an idiot, pleading with her own journal to understand her reasons. Her night had gone to complete shit, and she knew that her life in Sherwood—at least at Westerburg—was officially over. Heather Chandler would make sure of that.

God, why had she ever agreed to go to that Remington party? Why had she thought it would be any different from what it was? All that guy wanted to do was get in her pants, and she didn't want that. She wasn't giving that out to just anyone.

She thought about Jason Dean, about the boy who claimed to have superpowers to fight the aliens with, the same kid who'd lit Kurt Kelly and Ram Sweeney on fire, and shook her head at herself. She was insane. She had to be.

Still, there was something about him, something that intrigued her and made her want to know more and had her wondering what kissing him would be like.

Had to be better than Brad, who'd tried to push for sex when she wasn't interested and didn't feel good. She could not handle her liquor. Maybe if she hadn't had anything to drink, she'd be okay. She wouldn't have caused this mess.

No, it wasn't just her. It was Brad and Heather's expectation that she'd just fuck that guy when she'd just met him.

Oh, Christ. I can't explain it, but I'm allowed an understanding that my parents and these Remington University assholes have chosen to ignore... I understand that I must stop Heather.

Betty Finn was a true friend and I sold her out for a bunch of Swatch-dogs and Diet Coke-heads. Killing Heather would be like offing the Wicked Witch of the West. Wait. East. West. God, I sound like a fucking psycho.

She was insane. She knew she was. She'd become a Heather, and for what? To be a slut and put out for every college guy that came around? No. She wasn't doing that, not even to save herself from the shitstorm that would come on Monday.

Tomorrow, I'll be kissing her aerobicized ass, but tonight, let me dream of a world without Heather—a world where I am free.

She closed her eyes, trying to picture it, and then she heard a sound at her window. Turning, she swallowed in surprise.

"Dreadful etiquette. I apologize," Jason Dean said, leaning in her window.

"It's okay," she said, though it really wasn't because how the hell did he know where she lived, and who just went up to a window like that?

"I don't suppose you have anywhere for a hamster, do you?"

November 3

"See you tomorrow," Mike called, and Will waved him off, heading toward Mirkwood and home. He turned his bike around with a sigh, not wanting to head back to his own house yet. He had wanted to have the guys over after school, but his mom said no because of some stupid PTA thing, so she was making dinner early, and while he was sure it wouldn't bother Nancy, who would probably spend the whole night on the phone mooning over Steve Harrington again, he wasn't hungry and didn't want to spend all night staring at the walls.

He should probably spend some time working on the campaign. They should have time over the weekend to do a long one, and the guys would be disappointed if it ended up lame like the one last time, but he wasn't in the mood to fix the stuff he knew was wrong with that one.

Sometimes he thought he'd rather not be the DM, but the last time they'd let someone else do it was a complete disaster, so he always

seemed to get stuck doing it. Maybe it was just because it was Dustin, right? Lucas might be good at being dungeon master. Or even Will. Will had a good imagination.

He walked into the house, seeing the table already set and grimacing. Nancy was setting Holly in her chair, and the baby was pulling at her hair.

"Have a seat, Mike," his mom said. "Your dad will have to warm up his meal."

Mike thought it might actually be nice to eat without his dad. He never had anything good to say at dinner, if he said anything at all.

"I was going to do some work on—"

"Later. We eat together like a family," his mom insisted. She brought the pan over to the table, putting it on a potholder. She took off the lid and started dishing them up. Great.

"Hey, Mom," Nancy said, taking her seat and reaching for her water. "Can I have a bit extra for tomorrow when I go to the mall?"

His mother frowned as she set the plate down in front of her. "I thought we agreed no mall."

"I didn't find anything I liked in the stores here," Nancy said. "And... it's not entirely for me, not anymore."

"Yeah, sure," Mike said. "It's about Ste—"

His sister kicked him so hard he swore and got a glare from his mom. "Language."

"It's completely bogus. I ask for extra pizza for game night and I can't have it, but Nancy can have it so she can impress some lame high school jerk? That's complete bull—"

"Don't," his mother warned, giving him his plate. "And we said no to extra pizzas because five should be enough even for four boys."

"Exactly," Nancy said. He shot her another glare, still pissed she was

doing all of this to impress a guy. She'd gotten so lame since she went to high school. "And it's not to impress anyone. Actually, if she knew about it, she'd probably be pretty upset, but... I was hoping I could add a bit extra to the budget. I want to take Veronica with us tomorrow."

"What? You're hanging out with Veronica the Vampire? Since when?"

"Mike," his mom said, giving Holly a small bowl before going to get her own plate. "I didn't know you were friends with Veronica, Nancy."

"I'm not. Not... really. No one is, and that's part of the problem. I... Barb and I talked to her today, and it turns out she's like a genius at chemistry, so I might try and get her to help me study, but there's also... you know how everyone jokes about her being a copy of her aunt? Down to her clothes?"

"Oh, honey, that's not—"

"It's true. All of her clothes burned in the fire. She's wearing Joyce's stuff because they don't have enough money for her to buy new clothes."

His mom sat down. "Oh, that's awful. I had no idea. I mean, it seems so obvious when you say it, we all knew about the fire, but that poor girl..."

"Poor girl? She's a freak. Will says all she does is stare at the walls. And she doesn't talk."

"She did to me," Nancy insisted. "And if you call her a vampire again, I will smack you."

"Since when do you care about her? It's been a month and you didn't do anything before. You were too busy making eyes at Mister Big Hair."

"I was not making eyes at—you know what? You're being a little sh—brat. A brat. I am trying to do something good for someone else, and yeah, maybe I didn't do it soon enough, but maybe Veronica wasn't ready for it, either. I said hello before, and she just stared at me."

Today, she talked. So it was the right time, and I'm not sorry I talked to her. I'm just sorry I have a little prick for a brother."

"Nancy," his mom said. "I'm proud of you for reaching out to Veronica. I know she could use it. And yes, I think getting her something nice when she goes shopping with you is a great idea. I don't like the way you're talking to your brother. Both of you need to calm down and stop snapping at each other all the time. You used to get along."

"Yeah, back when she was still cool and not hung up on popularity contests," Mike muttered, getting another glare from his sister.

He just had a thought. The campaign should so have a witch in it. Or maybe a Drow with a name close to Nancy.

He smiled, knowing how he was going to fix this campaign.

Will turned down the driveway, the bike rattling along as he went. Jonathan would probably be back before he got there, same with the vampire, but he couldn't stay at Mike's tonight, some PTA thing of his mom's, so he was on his own for the night. Lucas had some family thing, and Dustin a doctor thing, so he was stuck at home tonight, much as being crowded in by Jonathan and Veronica was the last thing he wanted.

He wished she would just go away. They'd never had a cousin before, not really, and he didn't want one now, especially not a creepy girl who took his room and stared at the walls all the time. Sometimes he thought he heard her talking to herself, too.

He stopped his bike near the house, frowning at the sight of the strange car sitting next to Jonathan's. He didn't know it, and he knew Jonathan didn't have any friends, so it wasn't like it was one of them.

And then he heard voices shouting. One of them had to be Jonathan's. Will swallowed, walking up to the house. The vampire was sitting in the doorway, shuddering and muttering to herself.

"Dad?" Will asked, frowning at the sight of his brother wrestling with

his father, who shouldn't even be here. He didn't live here anymore. He didn't want to see them.

"Just get out of here," Jonathan said. "You don't belong here. We don't need you here or want you. Go. Now."

"You can't order me out of my house, boy."

"This isn't your house. You left us. Do it again. Just go before you make this worse than it already is. I'm not asking. I'm telling. Go, or I will make you leave."

"What, you?" Lonnie asked, snorting. "The little pussy who couldn't stop crying for a week over a damned rabbit. She raised both of you like sissies, and you can't do anything to me. You won't. This is my house, and I'm not going. You're overreacting to me wanting to have a little conversation with your mom, and it's ridiculous."

"You're drunk, and that is not Mom," Jonathan said. "Do you have any idea what you've done? She was finally talking to us, but now she's—look at her. Look at what you did. You scared her out of her mind."

Will looked back at the vampire. His dad had done that to her? She didn't look that different from normal. Jonathan was wrong, wasn't he?

"Just go. Sober up and maybe you can talk to Mom then, but you're leaving now. I mean it," Jonathan said, trying to take Lonnie's arm and walk him out. Lonnie shoved him off, knocking Jonathan back into the wall. Will flinched, and then when his dad turned back toward him, he backed up in fear.

"Come on, Joyce. No need to be like that," Lonnie said, stopping next to Veronica and grabbing hold of her. She screamed, and Will ran.

He thought about going for the gun in the shed, but he couldn't do it, couldn't shoot his own father. He circled back around the house, using the back door to get in and go for the phone. He pulled it down and went around the corner where he wouldn't be seen as he called the police.

Hop leaned back in the driver's seat of the Bronco, swallowing down the pill. He closed his eyes for a moment, just needing time to let it do its thing. He didn't want to think about why he had them or how much he needed them. He just wanted it to work so he could go back to his day of pretending that this town actually needed him.

Well, Joyce might, Lord knew she could use a friend and a lot more than that—like a winning lottery ticket—but she wouldn't accept his help, and he'd already tried there. He supposed there was some chance of approaching the girl in this equation, but knowing Hawkins, they'd take any interest he showed in Veronica the wrong way.

"Chief," Flo's voice crackled over the radio. "Come in, Chief."

He groaned and reached for the radio. "Yeah, Flo. What's up? Another garden gnome theft?"

"Got a call about a domestic disturbance over at the Byers' place. You better get over there."

Shit. It had to be the girl, right?

"I'm on my way," he said, putting the radio back and starting the engine. He pulled out of the spot, starting for the road to the Byers' place. He was half out of town when he stopped, flipped an illegal u-turn—he was the chief of police, who was going to complain about it?—and went back to the general store.

He parked in front of the doors, leaving the engine running as he went inside. Joyce looked up from her magazine with a frown.

"I told you, Hop. I don't want any casseroles, vegetable or not."

"Joyce, something's up at your house. You better come with me."

"What?"

"All I know is domestic disturbance. I figure it's your niece, but Flo was a little short on details. No matter what, you'll want to be there, and hell, you might just be able to fix it, right? I mean, if it's her, she'll listen to you better than some strange man barging in, even if

I've got a badge.”

Joyce nodded, looking a bit shell-shocked, and he winced, regretting putting her through this, but if it was the girl, he didn't want his presence making things worse. He ushered Joyce toward the doors and she stopped, her eyes wide and panicked.

“I can't—I'm the only one—I—”

“Put the sign on closed and lock up,” Hop told her, and she did, her hands shaking as she fought with the keys. He guided her back to the truck, opening the door for her and helping her in before hurrying back to the driver's side and backing out again, gunning the engine as he took off for her house.

“Cigarettes are in my coat pocket,” he said, keeping his eyes on the road as he navigated them through town. He could use one himself, but he'd rather she have something to focus on while they drove. No matter how fast he went, it would still take too long to get there.

“God,” Joyce muttered, grabbing the pack from his coat. “Why is this happening? Hasn't she been through enough?”

“Yeah, I gotta figure she has,” Hop agreed, thinking uneasily of the night that Veronica had run off into the night and panicked everyone in the Byers house. Her ravings that night were freaky as hell, and he'd rather not remember that.

Veronica looked too much like Joyce. Everyone said it, but they didn't feel it, didn't understand it. Seeing that girl hurting was like watching Joyce back in high school, and he'd been just as helpless then as he was now.

No. He was the chief of police, and whatever the hell this was, they were going to deal with it.

Joyce fumbled with her seatbelt, not remembering when she put it on. Hop probably told her to, when she wasn't paying any attention. She would have done it blindly, like she had with the cigarettes, panic making her function on autopilot without realizing what she

was doing.

She didn't know what had happened at her house, whether it was Veronica or one of the boys, and it almost didn't matter because she couldn't take it if anything had happened to any of them. Veronica wasn't hers, no, but she felt like... well, it was weird and complicated, but the girl was her in so many ways, not just her looks, and Joyce really didn't know how to feel about it.

"Stay back," Hop told her, and she glared at him, getting out of his truck. He'd brought her so things wouldn't get bad, hadn't he? She was going with him. "You recognize that car?"

She swallowed. "No."

"Then stay back." He went forward, toward the yelling and screaming, and she followed after him, not willing to sit there and do nothing.

She could barely see around Hop when he got to the door.

"Let her go, Lonnie."

"You stay out of this, Hopper. This ain't none of your concern."

"Lonnie?" Joyce demanded, going under Hop's arm and squeezing in through the doorway, staring in shock at her ex-husband. He had Veronica, despite her squirming and kicking and screaming. Jonathan was trying to get her free, but he hadn't managed it. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"He's drunk," Jonathan said, bitterness in his voice. "He keeps insisting she's you and you're still married."

"Even if you were, Byers, that's no way to treat a woman. You let the girl go, right now," Hop said. "Don't make me do something you'll regret."

Joyce winced. She didn't want any more fighting. "Lonnie, look at me. I'm Joyce. I'm over here. You need to let go of Veronica right now."

Lonnie looked at her, confused. “Joyce? How are you... what the...”

He dropped Veronica on the ground, and Jonathan shoved him toward Hop. Joyce ran over to Veronica, kneeling next to her. She looked up at Jonathan.

“You okay, baby? Did he—”

“Knocked me down once. I'm fine. I just... couldn't stop him,” Jonathan said, joining her beside Veronica. “She completely freaked. He wouldn't listen or let her go.”

Joyce looked over at where Hop was cuffing Lonnie, unable to summon any sympathy for him, any understanding. She was so angry she almost wished Hop had punched him right in the face. “Will?”

Jonathan looked around. “Uh... I don't... I'm not sure he's home yet. I'll go look.”

Joyce nodded, turning her attention back to Veronica. She lifted the girl's chin. “Hey, look at me. It's Aunt Joyce. You remember me? You're okay now. You're safe. Lonnie's... he's a drunk and an idiot, but he can't hurt you now, okay?”

Veronica shuddered. “He didn't come. He said he would come, but he didn't come. It burns. It *burns*...”

Joyce winced, wrapping her arms around the girl and holding on tight, rocking her gently as she tried to calm her. “It's okay. I'm here. You're safe.”

“It burns,” Veronica repeated. “It burns.”

And outside, Lonnie's car exploded.

5. Chapter 5

Summary for the Chapter:

A bit of a recovery after a few difficult moments.

Notes for the Chapter:

It has been interesting trying to find a balance for the role JD has in this universe, as it's a bit off from his normal confident one. He's not quite in the same place as Eleven, as he's been free for a while and picked up as much as he could, but in some ways he seems younger than her, and it's... odd to do and makes me feel like the characterization is... off.

It makes sense, it just... I don't know. I have doubts. And this part was supposed to be fluffier in his stuff, but it didn't happen that way. Again.

Also... it is very hard to summarize these chapters. I'm just saying. And I had to resist saying something about this chapter not ending on a bang like the last one. I'm a bit of a mess.

September 27

“A hamster?” Veronica asked, staring in confusion at the boy currently hauling himself in through her window. He dropped on the floor and she winced, hoping her parents didn't hear that. He reached into his pocket and took out a small furry brown thing.

Holy shit, there really was a hamster.

“I named him Slushie,” he said, and she continued to stare at him, not sure what to think of any of this. “I like slushies.”

“Are you... okay?” Not only did he sound about five years old, he hadn't moved since he fell into her room. She crossed toward him, thinking she might have misunderstood him completely.

“Tired,” he said. He closed his eyes, and then he forced them back open. “You didn't say you'd take him. Are you not going to take him? He needs a home and I... they're hunting me. I can't... I can't keep him with me.”

“Hunting you?”

He dragged himself up, sitting on her bed. He looked down at his hamster and over at her. “How can you like a monster like me and not like my hamster? It's innocent. I think they'd call it... cute.”

“It is cute,” she said, sitting down next to him. “I'm just confused. You live with your dad, don't you? I know you move a lot, but you'd still have a home for him. Unless... someone really is hunting you. I don't... why? Because of the thing in the lunchroom? I guess... Well, Kurt Kelly and Ram Sweeney's parents would push the cops to arrest you, but that's not a reason to runaway from your dad.”

He looked at her. “Not my dad. Don't... that's... um... can you just take the hamster? I need to... need to leave. Have to rest... drained... too drained...”

Veronica still didn't understand. He wasn't making sense. She put a hand on his leg, and his eyes got wide. “I'll take the hamster if you explain yourself.”

“Ask.”

“I don't even know where to begin—how did you burn those jerks in the cafeteria?”

“I create fire with my mind,” he said, and she stared at him. He was kidding, right? He had to be. No one could do that. “You don't believe me.”

“I know you said you'd deal with the aliens with your powers, but I don't—”

“Cigarette.”

She reached over and grabbed a pack out of the drawer on her nightstand. She took one out and held it out to him. He shook his head. She rolled her eyes and put it to her lips, figuring she may as well use it even if he wasn't.

The end brightened, and she coughed, inhaling and almost dropping it as she realized the damned thing was lit. She hadn't touched it, hadn't gotten out her matches, and he hadn't moved. If he had a lighter, he couldn't have gotten to her cigarette.

“You're kidding.”

He shook his head, rising. “No. Too tired... do more. Shouldn't have... done that. Going... pass out. You... the hamster. You... keep?”

He stumbled toward the window and she rushed over to catch him. If he tried to go down a ladder right now, he'd kill himself.

“Come over here,” she said, dragging him back to the bed. She sat him down and stubbed out the cigarette, not sure how she hadn't burned anything. “You can rest here.”

“No.” He tried to get up again. “They could... they find you, they kill you.”

She pushed him back down. “You just want me alive so I can take care of your hamster.”

He touched her face. “You. Special. And pretty.”

She laughed. “Oh, I'm so flattered. You flirt like a caveman.”

“Burned whole house... firewalked across town... too tired to flirt...” he said, almost falling off of the bed. She caught him before he could and pushed him back.

“Firewalk?”

“Can move... through fire... to different place... can't get hurt... by flames...”

"You're kidding."

He shook his head. "No. Freak... made in lab... all wrong... and... tired. Very... tired."

She pulled him down onto the bed, getting him to lie down. If he was so damned tired, he could rest. Maybe when he woke up, he'd really make sense. "Stay put."

"You stay with me?"

"Depends. Where's your hamster?"

"Dr. Brenner."

He looked over from Eleven's door. The experiment was a success, and the girl was now resting. He was pleased with what she'd done tonight. He had questions, several questions, but unfortunately, she could push no further tonight. Her body was at its limit. It was unfortunate that something as powerful as her mind was housed in something as fragile as her child's body.

"What is it now?"

"Confirmation on the sighting of Nine. It's him."

"Casualties?"

"Four of the advance team burned trapped in a house," the agent reported. Brenner frowned. "The house belonged to a man named Bud Dean. They believed he had been aiding the boy for several months if not years since his escape. He even enrolled Nine in the local high school using his last name."

"Nine in high school?" The idea seemed absurd. Brenner would not have thought the boy had any particular need or aptitude for schooling. Oh, Nine was intelligent enough in his way, but he was hardly book smart. "Seems foolish."

"He didn't tolerate it well. The initial report was that a new student had lit two others on fire without any incendiary agents."

Brenner nodded. Yes, that sounded very much like Nine. He had a temper, that child, and he was the only successful pyrokenetic they had, if he could even be considered a success. He was out of control and full of rage. He'd always been difficult to subdue, even before he got control of his fire, leading to more physical punishments than any of the girls received. They were usually good with a single charge from a shock prod, but not Nine. Nine would keep fighting until he was unconscious and forced them to resort to other measures to ensure his compliance.

Not that he didn't do his best to please his Papa, but sadly there were consequences to his failures, and the boy failed more often than he succeeded. It had taken an unfortunately long time to understand just where that boy's talent lay, and pyrokenesis was hardly the most valuable asset in their arsenal.

Eleven had much more promise.

"I assume that Mr. Dean was dealt with," Brenner said. "What of these children Nine injured? How many people witnessed the event?"

"The cafeteria was full, but most believe he must have had a lighter on him when he started the fires. He ran, so they didn't find it, and the official story on the house fire has already been given. It was faulty wiring."

"Double the teams. Find him."

"He just killed four men."

"In a house fire. Manipulating it on that level should have left him exhausted and presents the best opportunity for bringing him in. Right now he is weak. Triple the teams. Find anywhere he might have gone to ground. Anyone helping him needs to be silenced. Where is Agent Dyer? I want her to take charge of this."

"Sir—"

"Put Agent Dyer in charge. I'm sure we'll have no further... incidents. And get me a full report on the altercation in the cafeteria and the house fire. I want to see just how much progress Nine has made."

He woke in the dark, aware of the sound of someone else breathing next to him. That was strange. He wasn't used to it, not unless Bud got too drunk and ended up passing out near him. He'd spent years on his own, locked in his bedroom at the lab or in that dark isolation room, and he hadn't ever known what it was to share space in any good way before. It was always experiments or beatings or worse.

He turned over onto his side and studied his companion. He hadn't meant to fall asleep in Veronica's bed, but burning the house and doing his firewalk had really drained him. He shouldn't have made it to her home, but he'd thought she'd taken in Slushie, and he had to try. It would be hard to run with a hamster, and he'd probably get the little guy killed.

And her. They'd kill her if they knew he'd told her about where he came from and what he was. He hadn't meant to. He was just so tired he couldn't think and had to make her understand she had to take the hamster.

"You're awake."

He nodded. "I should go."

"Feeling better, then? Not so... drained?"

"Sleep helps," he said. He had to get his energy back and rest his brain, Papa would say. Not that they always let him, no, they'd push and push and demand more, but sometimes they'd stop and say he had enough. "Not always, but sometimes."

"They hurt you, didn't they? That lab... the people who... made you," she said, reaching over to touch his face. "How young were you? Were you always there? Did they... What did they do to make it so you could make fire?"

"Pain." He couldn't explain the experiments better than that. He'd never known their purpose. He'd only ever pleased Papa when the fire showed itself, and when it did, it was always about making more no matter how much it hurt.

"I'm sorry."

He frowned. "Why apologize to me? You didn't do it. Didn't know. Weren't there. Unless you're not taking the hamster. I want you to have the hamster."

"I'm not one for pets as a rule."

"You'd care for him," he insisted. "You... seem good. Understanding. I... I saw it, when I first saw you... you wouldn't hate me."

"Is that what they told you? That everyone would hate you for having fire?"

"You were awake all this time. You... are scared of me."

She shook her head. "I couldn't sleep because I was trying to figure it all out. Also... Slushie squirms like crazy and you hog the bed and I'm not a very good pillow, but you like to snuggle in your sleep."

"What is... snuggle?"

"You don't know what snuggling is?" She laughed. "I find that a bit hard to believe, but here, I'll show you."

She moved up against him, and he tensed, not sure how to react to her being all over him like she was. It felt good, but his mind remembered bad stuff that was similar and he didn't—how was this okay and that not and he was confused again. He hated how little he knew sometimes. He felt like an idiot.

And he knew Papa preferred him that way.

"I didn't hold you like this."

"Oh, no, not quite. You'd have to move your arms like... there. That's it. This is technically spooning, but yeah, it was about like this. I was almost asleep the first time you did it. You kind of scared me."

"I didn't mean to."

"I know you didn't, and I'm not mad at you," she said. "I know it's a little hard to believe, but you are the first boy I've done this with, and it... it feels pretty good, actually. A lot better than that jackass at the

Remington party trying to put a move on me.”

He didn't understand that last part, but he didn't want to seem like an idiot again, so he didn't say ask her about that. “I should go. And you can't tell anyone you saw me or about anything I told you.”

“You didn't show me what it was like to firewalk.”

“Can't. Takes a big fire. Not like lighting a cigarette or a candle. Have to burn a big area to make it possible. Lots of energy. It... can hurt. Not by the fire, but my head. More than a nosebleed. Like... cracking a skull.”

“And you still do it?”

He nodded. “They can't follow me when I firewalk. Can't see me. It's... almost like being somewhere else. I... I can't explain it. I don't... I never told anyone else about it, not even Bud. Shouldn't have told you.”

“I want to know,” she said. “I didn't believe you at first, but I was thinking about some of the stuff I read once when I was less into gloss and more into reading whatever I could get my hands on and I saw somewhere where they said normal people only use like ten percent of their brains so if you can use more... well, being a pyromaniac makes sense.”

“A what?”

She laughed. “Okay, that's not really the technical term for what you are, but I kind of like it for you anyway. My little pyro.”

He frowned. “Is this a... good thing? Wait. You called me... yours. What do you mean?”

She shrugged. “No one else knows anyone who can start fires at will and somehow walks through them unscathed. Only me. And that's only you. So in a sense... mine.”

He frowned again. “I don't know. I... I shouldn't be yours because I shouldn't have told you... but I kind of like it.”

“Yeah?”

He nodded, and she leaned over, kissing him. He'd had kisses before, but not like this. At first it was a bit gentle and he thought he tasted some kind of fruit but not real fruit on her lips, and then her mouth opened and his did and he knew the answer to what he'd wanted to know, what it felt like, what it tasted like, her mouth. He liked it.

She pulled back and looked at him, running her fingers over her lips. “I... um... That was...”

“Bad?”

She shook her head. “No. Good. Very good.”

“So you'll keep the hamster?” he asked, and she stared at him. “I need to know. I have to go. I can't stay. It's not safe.”

“Seriously? We just kissed and it was all so I would take your hamster?”

“No.” He reached over to touch her face. “You... you are special. You accept me. You believe me. And you don't hate me. It's... no one else has. Bud was the closest, but he still wanted to use me. You're not like him... unless you're trying to use me for sex and people have but I don't like it and—”

“What?”

“I said I don't like it. I mean, I liked us kissing, and there were a few times when the touching wasn't so bad, but it was mostly bad and not like this and—”

“You're saying someone forced themselves on you?”

He shouldn't have let her know about that. It changed everything. She didn't like him anymore. He could tell. “You do hate me. Listen to you. You're horrified.”

“Because what they did to you was wrong and you're talking about it like it's nothing,” she said, sitting up and running a hand through her hair. “Do you even know what they did?”

He nodded, turning away from her. "It... I know the act. It... Bud told me it wasn't that uncommon for scrawny boys like me on the streets to do that, so it was my fault."

"Oh, God. I want to smack him," she said, coming around to sit next to him. She touched his cheek. "That was not right, what they did, and it was not your fault. Listen to you. You don't understand it, not really, because you don't even know how wrong it was what they did, not beyond that it hurt you, and I—I almost feel like I shouldn't tell you because... it'll just hurt you more if you do know. I am... I'm so sorry."

"I still don't know why you're apologizing to me."

She pulled him into her arms. "You should not have had to hurt like that. Not ever."

"You didn't hurt me. I told you. The kiss was fine. I liked it. You taste good. Kind of like cigarettes but like some kind of fruit and... and you're soft right now and have nice hands... but you should let me go because if they find me here, they'll kill you."

"I swear, I am going to find that man pretending to be your father and smack him with a croquet mallet. I'll take one from the yard and —"

"Bud's dead. They killed him before I started the fire."

She sat back. "What?"

"I only kind of liked Bud. I... He wasn't as bad as some others. He still wanted to use me, and I didn't... He didn't experiment on me like Papa, and he gave me food or let me buy it for myself more often than they did at the lab and he gave me clothes and if I hadn't lost the bet I could have had more. He was okay. I'm not sorry he's dead. Not sorry they're dead, either."

"They... you said they were coming for you."

"I only killed some of them in the fire. More will come. I'm... I'm too dangerous."

“You killed people.”

He nodded. “I did. I think four of them, that's a standard team. I used the fire to fuse the doors and windows and trapped them and firewalked out. Are you... now you hate me, right? Because I killed them?”

“I... you were defending yourself.”

“I scare you.”

She shook her head. “That's what's so... I don't. I should, maybe, but I don't.”

“You don't?”

“No. I could be in shock, but... I'm not afraid of you.”

“I would never hurt you. I... I would probably hurt people who hurt you. I could even kill them. But I'd never hurt you. You're special.”

She touched his cheek again. He really liked how her hand felt. She was kind, her touch wasn't like the others. It didn't hurt. It felt nice. He didn't think it felt as good for her when he put his hand on her cheek, but she closed her eyes and made a little noise.

“Are you okay?”

“This is insane.”

“I have been told I'm deranged.”

She laughed. “Oh, fuck, that shouldn't be funny. It is, but it shouldn't be.”

“I like the way you laugh. I'd like to make you do it again.”

“Well, you probably will, and you're almost definitely going to make me cry when you leave, and I keep thinking this has to be some kind of dream, that I drank too much or got rophied at that damned party because I have to be imagining all this or maybe I am like my crazy aunt—great aunt—and I've just gone and flipped it.”

"I don't want you to cry."

"Then maybe you should stay."

"It's not safe."

"You can make fire with your mind. How could I be any safer than when I'm right next to you?"

He frowned. "I... I don't know."

"I think that's because the answer is I can't be," she told him, leaning in to kiss him again. "If this is all a dream, let's make it a good one. A very good one."

November 3

"Holy shit, what did you do?" Will demanded, and Hop looked back at him with a frown, his eyes forced away from the inferno outside for a moment.

"Language," Joyce said, still cradling her niece—damned if that didn't look a bit bizarre, strong as their resemblance was—and frowning at her son.

"She blew up a car."

Hop wanted to smack someone. He had a feeling that was his doing or Joyce's, that whatever Lonnie had done to the car he'd driven in had left a dangerous leak that had caught fire when one of them tossed their cigarette on the ground, and while it wasn't ideal, he wasn't about to be sorry about it. Lonnie didn't deserve a fancy car all suped up like that when he wasn't paying Joyce shit in child support.

"She didn't blow up a car," Joyce said. "How could you think she had anything to do with that? She's..."

"She's saying it burns."

"She's reliving the night her parents died," Hop said, fighting with Lonnie, who was struggling again after seeing his car go up in flames. "I've seen it before, kid. Guys I served with in 'Nam. They... they'd flash back to stuff. Sounded a lot like her when they were talking about napalm."

He didn't need to think about that himself. That wasn't anything worth remembering.

"She hurt or just scared?"

"Probably bumps and bruises, but I don't know."

He nodded. He didn't like not knowing, but Veronica was in no state to tell them much of anything. He knew they'd have to do something about the car, first, though, before they did anything else. He was tempted to knock the idiot he was holding unconscious to make things easier for everyone, but he wouldn't do that in front of his kids. "Jonathan, come hold him for me for a second. I'm going to see what I can do about the fire."

He did, and Lonnie started to fight him. He leaned down into the other man's ear. "Knock it off, or I'll make sure you go back to Indianapolis without any balls. We clear?"

"Fuck you."

"I mean it. You give that kid trouble, and you'll lose more than your car," Hop warned him. He rose and headed for the door, stopping at the end of the porch.

Something wasn't right here. Lonnie's car was burning, but nothing else was. Just that damned car. It was hot, burning so intensely the interior was probably already ash by now, but none of the other cars had caught fire, none of it had spread. At all. Not even the grass nearby seemed singed.

The fuck.

He heard the rumble of a car and looked over to see the squad car coming down the drive, Powell and Callahan inside it. They stopped short, and he could hear Powell on the radio. He turned back and

grabbed Lonnie from Jonathan, figuring the kid was about to lose control of him anyway.

"Come on," he said, dragging the other man along by the arm, past his burning wreck and to the other car.

"Jesus, Chief, you all right?"

"Yeah. Fire's... contained," he said, still not sure what was up with that. "You radio it in?"

"Yeah. They're sending the truck."

Hop nodded. Probably for the best, even if it didn't seem to be spreading. "Here. Take him back to the station. Let him cool his heels there."

"Charges?"

"Looks like he let himself in, had a few too many waiting for Joyce to come home, but she was working a double and the kids got here first," Hop began, and Powell just frowned at him, but Callahan swore. "Yeah, he mistook the girl for Joyce and grabbed her. Jonathan tried to get him off, but he wasn't having it. He still had her when I got here, wouldn't listen until he saw Joyce and got confused."

"He hurt her?" Callahan asked, since it wasn't much of a secret that Lonnie was not a "fun" drunk.

"Seems to be mostly shaken up, but she's so out of it right now I doubt she knows."

"You want us to radio in for an ambulance?"

Hop shook his head. He didn't think that would go over well. The flashing lights had definitely not helped the other night when they'd found her in the woods. "Just get him out of here. I'll sort out the rest of it."

"Sure thing, Chief."

“Problem, Powell?”

“Uh... just something a bit weird about the car,” he said. “How'd that happen?”

“Cigarette and a leak, I think,” Hop answered. He looked back at the burning car, frowning. Wait a minute. Was the fire out already? He saw smoke, but no flames now.

And in that smoke, a shadow. Something dark along the shed, almost looked human.

“Chief?”

“Just get him out of here,” Hop repeated, moving back toward the wreck.

“Veronica, sweetheart, look at me,” Joyce said, putting her hands on her niece's cheeks and getting her to look at her. Oh, that was almost too weird. Give her a different hair cut and older clothes, and she would be looking at herself at that age. She tried to ignore it, but it was still hard, even after a month with the girl living in their house. “That's it. It's me, Joyce. Your aunt. You know where you are?”

Veronica's eyes darted around the room and back to Joyce. She tried to lower her head, sniffing.

“Sweetie, it's okay. It's over. You're safe.”

“The police have him,” Jonathan said, coming back to them. “I couldn't tell... did he hurt you?”

Veronica shuddered, trying to disappear into Joyce's sweater.

“We need to know if he hurt you,” Veronica said. “Even just a bump or a bruise. Can you tell me if he hurt you?”

Veronica reached down and lifted up her shirt or trying to, though it wasn't like she could see much in this position.

“She's so weird,” Will said from the hallway, and Joyce sighed. That

was not helping any.

“Will, why don't you see if any of your friends want to... hang out or go to the arcade or something?” Joyce suggested. She knew they didn't have the money for much of anything, but he could use a distraction, and Veronica would probably do better with less stress. “And Jonathan... the extinguisher in the shed. Take it to Hop for the car, okay? I'm going to run Veronica a bath.”

She rose, accepting Jonathan's help to get Veronica on her feet. He gave her another look, but Joyce waved him off. The bath should help, and they'd know if Veronica was hurt, too. She led her niece down the hall and into the bathroom, letting her sit on the toilet while she started the water.

She didn't think any of Veronica's clothes counted as evidence—thank god Lonnie hadn't been that confused—but she would keep them to the side for a bit anyway.

“You need help getting undressed?”

Veronica looked up at her. “There was a fire?”

“Yeah. Um... Lonnie's car was burning. I'm not sure why.”

Veronica actually smiled, just a small little thing, but she seemed pleased, and it was unsettling. Joyce didn't know what to think of it.

“Did you need help?”

Veronica tugged on the sweater, not making much progress getting it off. Joyce took hold of the sleeve and pulled it off, doing the same with the other side. Veronica pulled the t-shirt off and ran her fingers along a line just underneath her bra that looked a little red and was probably where Lonnie had grabbed her.

“That sore?”

The girl nodded. “Arm, too. Don't... it burned?”

“The car did. Do you want to go see the doctor, Veronica? Maybe we should take you to the doctor. I know you don't look in too bad of

shape, but you had a bad scare there and—”

“It's okay. There was a fire. It's okay.” Veronica stood, kicking off her shoes and taking off her jeans. Joyce put a hand to her head. One thing this was not was okay. Veronica was not okay. A fire did not make any of this better.

Hell, if Lonnie blamed her or Hop for the car burning, he'd be even more of a nuisance, and how was he supposed to leave now?

“I'm going to go check on Will,” Joyce said. “You'll be okay in the bath?”

“Not going to drown myself if that's what you're asking,” Veronica said, looking at her. She almost seemed lucid again. “It's... I'm... I... He said she measured him, too.”

“What?”

“Great Aunt Darlene. The coffin. I didn't like the coffin. Not going in one. Ever.”

“Oh,” Joyce said, wincing. She hadn't realized her aunt had done that to Veronica, too. Poor Jonathan had nightmares for a week and refused to visit her again. “No. No coffin. Just a warm bath to help with the aches. I'm going to check on Will, and I'll bring you a change of clothes, okay?”

Veronica didn't answer, and Joyce made herself leave, telling herself the girl would be fine while she was gone. It would only be a few minutes.

Jonathan eyed the car that had belonged to his dad and frowned, not sure what to think. He didn't know how that fire had started, but unlike Will, he wasn't going to blame it on Veronica. She'd been having a meltdown in the living room when it went up, so it had nothing to do with her.

It had nothing to do with anyone. They'd all been inside when it happened.

He shook his head, going toward the shed. He didn't think the extinguisher was necessary now, but his mom would want him to get it all the same, and while the chief's truck was still here, he didn't see the man.

He opened the door to the shed, and the chief turned around, pointing his gun at him. Jonathan froze. "Uh..."

"Christ. Sorry," the chief said, putting the gun away.

"What the hell? Where's Lonnie?"

"Gave him to the boys to take to the station. Thought I saw something—maybe someone—over here, so I was looking around."

"And?"

The chief shrugged. "All I've found so far is you, so... You know, must have been something in the smoke. Eyes playing tricks on me or something."

"Or something," Jonathan agreed, thinking about how he'd felt someone watching him earlier. Was that Lonnie? Had he been at the school? But then if he had, why hadn't he realized Veronica was Veronica and not his mom?

"You have something to add?"

"Just... something stupid."

"Out with it, kid."

"I thought maybe someone was watching me at the school today," Jonathan said. "I was... well, it's going to sound... creepy, but I was checking on Veronica at lunch. I... I took pictures of her talking to Barb Holland. And it was okay at first. They were laughing together. And then something happened and Veronica left and... And I felt like someone was there behind me, but I didn't see anyone."

"Your dad?"

"That's what I was just thinking, but I don't know. He was here, and

we came straight from school. Why didn't he recognize her?"

"If he saw you at lunch, he might have been sober," the chief reminded him. "He came back here, got drunk... lost his head. It happens."

Jonathan nodded. That fit, too, the piece he didn't have before, though it didn't explain what the chief had seen, if he saw anything. "Why go to my school, though? He doesn't give a shit about me or Will. He says he does, but he doesn't."

The chief shrugged. "I don't know. I think I've wasted enough time in this shed, though. Your cousin all right?"

"I don't think he really hurt her, but he scared her really bad. I haven't seen her like that since..."

"Since the night she ran off on you guys."

"Yeah."

The chief put his hand on Jonathan's shoulder. "Look, she's been through a lot. No one's denying that. No one's trying to. But she may be more like your mom than anyone thinks—stronger than anyone knows, just like your mom is."

Jonathan nodded. "I know. I just... Can you make sure he stays away for good this time? If she says no charges, I want them anyway. I don't want him back here. Not again. He doesn't need to do more damage. We don't need him in our lives. We don't want him. Even Will knows better than that. Mom... I don't know why she thinks it's better to just let it drop, but this can't drop."

"Trust me, kid. I don't want to let it go any more than you do."

6. Chapter 6

Summary for the Chapter:

A couple of tense mornings.

Notes for the Chapter:

I am a bit overwhelmed by the amount of plot I have to get through, and I'm still days before season one starts. Oops.

September 28

Veronica woke to find arms around her again, and she couldn't help smiling. She could feel her cheeks heating up, too, a bit embarrassed to be as happy as she felt right now. It was stupid. She knew that teenage romance never lasted, and this was not a normal one by any means. Talk about a dark horse. This boy was not just a rebel or a troublemaker. There was no one like him in the world. She didn't care if he could make fire with his mind. If that was all a dream last night, it didn't matter.

She wanted him. She had never wanted anyone as much as she wanted him. It wasn't physical, not completely, though she was attracted to him, but she just wanted to be around him. She wanted to know more about him. Maybe she was lying to herself to think it had nothing to do with him having abilities normal people didn't, but she wanted to believe she'd still learn as much as she could about any boyfriend she had or considered having.

Hadn't she learned her lesson with her so-called friends, the Heathers?

Besides, he needed her. All he'd ever known were people who wanted to use him, and that was wrong. So wrong. He needed to know what people should be like, real people that weren't out to further any

agenda or take advantage of him because he was special and didn't know enough about the world. She had to figure those people in the lab didn't care about him knowing what he should about life, about anything, only what they wanted him to know, which had left him completely unprepared for how horrible people could be and how dangerous it was, even for a boy with powers out there on his own, alone and frightened.

And if using fire drained him like it had last night, then... people could have done all sorts of things to him when he was weak and unable to fight back. He'd barely been able to stand.

“Mmm. Snuggle.”

“Yeah,” she said, fighting the giggles at his words. “I see you're awake again.”

“Awake... and apparently... horny? That the right word?”

She had noticed a bit of a morning wood, yes, especially right when he decided to start waking and snuggle closer, but she'd been trying to ignore it. She'd almost succeeded when he spoke.

“Yeah, it is,” she told him, turning over to face him. “And... I've heard that's perfectly normal.”

“Bud said it was. He liked talking about his dick, though, and I tried to ignore him.”

“I'm not surprised.”

“Is... bad?”

“No,” she said, because she was still attracted to him and wouldn't lie about that, even in her head. “Just... I'm not sure you... we... should... You deserve someone in your life who is not interested in you for sex... I mean, not that I don't want... God, listen to me.”

“I am.”

She winced, knowing she was really red. “I just... I don't want to take advantage of you. Which sounds weird, seeing as I'm the one without

much... experience, but yours wasn't good and... you should be able to... to have someone in your life that is not about... that."

"And you are?"

She thought about how intense the kissing and making out had gotten in the middle of the night and how hard it had been to stop herself from taking it further. He would have, too, but she just didn't feel right doing it. She wanted it with him, and she would have probably gone all the way last night, barely knowing him, if things were different. He wasn't like Brad at that party. He was unique, and he fascinated her, had since she saw him across the cafeteria.

It wasn't just about his powers. She'd been intrigued by him before he burned Kurt and Ram, before he came here and told her he had the ability to create fire with his mind.

"I want it to be more than that," she finally said, and he smiled at her, reaching over to touch her cheek. "And I don't want you to go."

"Have to. They know I'm here. They killed Bud. They will be looking for me. If they find me with you, they'll hurt you."

She sighed. "Do you have to go right now? They don't know—wouldn't know that you were here. They can't track you when you firewalk, right?"

"Not so far."

"So they'd assume you went far from here, wouldn't they?"

He bit his lip. "Maybe. They... they won't just assume that. They'll try and track any other movements... any connections. The boys in the cafeteria... they'll want to see what they know."

"Will they kill them?"

"Might. Depends on if they believe I could have done it without help or not. And... they kept saying... I burned their underwear first."

She laughed. "Really? That is so cool."

“It would have been hot.”

She shook her head. “Cool as in amazing. It's so *very*. And you're just as confused by that. Um... it's hilarious and fitting and I am so jealous you can do that.”

He touched her temple, tracing along the side of her face. “I think you are more, too. Up here.”

She shrugged. She didn't think she was anything like him, but she was smart. “Supposedly I'm a genius.”

“Genius is... smart. You are smart. You're also very pretty. And special. And I need to go so you stay safe.”

She sighed. “What if... we don't go anywhere? Or see anyone? As long as no one knows you're here, you're safe, right? So we just... wait until they're gone.”

He shook his head. “They won't leave until they're sure I have. They'll set up a listening place, where they can hear stuff. Probably the school. I... I saw the one at the lab once when I tried to get away from them. They had all these... sounds, listening to everything from the town. One time, before I found Bud... Bud found me... not really sure which it was... They found me because I tried to stay. Was too tired to run, had used up all my fire so just... hid. Then they caught me when I broke into the snack shack for a slushie. Had to burn down the slushie machine.”

“A tragedy.”

“Yes.”

She laughed, wanting to kiss him again. He was adorable.

“I still have to go.”

“Are you really rested? If you have to fight them again, could you? Can you do that firewalk thing to get away?”

He considered that, looking doubtful but trying to cover it up a second later. “Yeah.”

"You're a terrible liar," she told him, though she really liked that about him. "You hungry?"

"Yeah."

"Come on. Let's find you something to eat."

"Ew," he said, tempted to spit out what he'd just taken a bite of. "What is that?"

"Pâté," she answered, and he saw her laughing at him. He should be irritated by that, he didn't like it when people made fun of him, but she was different. He liked making her laugh, seeing that smile. She was so beautiful when she smiled. "And yeah, it's kind of gross, but it's just about all my mom knows how to make. That and spaghetti."

"Had day old turbo dogs that were better," he said, shoving the plate away. "Anything else?"

She nodded. "Yeah. Dad and I came to an agreement as soon as I could drive that I would get an extra stipend to my allowance if I got food we could eat behind her back and said it was for my friends. My mom thinks the Heathers can do no wrong, so she doesn't make a fuss about it. Let's see... something that's almost a meal..."

He came over to peer into the cabinet with her. "Are those chips?"

"That's not food."

"Sure it is," he said, taking the bag from her. "My favorite, even, after slushies."

"You need protein and stuff, not just a bunch of empty carbs. You have to be at your best in case they come for you," she said, trying to get the bag back. He held it up over her head and made her try and jump for it, smiling as he did. She stopped, shaking her head. "Fine, be that way. I'll just eat the leftovers that are real food."

He grimaced. "Leftovers are gross."

"What, Bud didn't raise you on a diet of takeout and leftovers? That

man actually cooked?”

“No, but he forgot the leftovers every time because he was too drunk to put them away at night, so they were always gross if they were the only thing to eat.”

“You could have put them away.”

He frowned. She wasn't wrong about that, though he knew that his reasons for not doing that weren't ones he wanted to discuss.

“We need to housetrain you. Seriously.”

“What?”

She grinned at him, taking hold of his jacket and pulling him in for a kiss. He dropped his chips on the floor, wanting to be closer to her, and he had her pushed up against the counter and was being really not okay by sneaking a hand up her shirt, but she didn't sound like she was hurting or didn't like it. She moaned instead of pushing him away.

Still, he made himself stop and pulled back, about to ask her if he'd done wrong, but she grabbed him and kissed him again until both of them were out of breath.

“This is crazy,” she said. “We should not be doing this.”

“You didn't like it?”

She shook her head. “No, I liked it. I liked it a lot. I like it so much I need a cold shower, but I—if Bud's not your real father, and you were born in a lab, I don't even know your name, and that... that's a little crazy.”

“Oh.” He grimaced, pulling up the coat sleeve and showing her the tattoo. “Only name I had before.”

“Nine?”

“Yeah.”

"That's a number," she said. "You're telling me they didn't even give you a name, just a number? Assholes. You are not just a body, not just an experiment."

"You're angry."

"Not at you," she said, reaching out for him. "Not at you. At them. And... I can't call you Nine."

"Yes, you can."

"I don't want to," she said. "You deserve more than a number, okay? You should have a name."

"He said it was Jason Dean, but I don't like Jason, and I'm not a Dean."

"JD?"

"Those are letters."

"Initials. Plenty of people go by initials. Or maybe Jay instead of Jason or something completely different. We could get a book and see about naming and—"

She was being so cute he had to kiss her, and he knew he shouldn't, but he did, and she stopped talking and did the moaning thing again, but he liked that sound. It made him feel a little funny but also good because she was happy when she made it. He knew that now.

The doorbell rang, and they both tensed up, looking over in fear.

"It might not be them," Veronica said. "Maybe Heather's just here early to make my life miserable."

"You want me to burn her?"

"No," she said. "Just let me get it. You stay put and try not to make any noise, just in case. Oh, and eat something."

He nodded, following her as much as he dared, wanting to be able to hear the people coming in even if he couldn't see them. She might be

right and this could be nothing, but if it wasn't, he needed to know right away. They could not be allowed to hurt her.

He leaned against the wall, listening to the door open.

"Veronica Sawyer?"

"Yes. Can I help you?"

"My name is Margaret Newcombe. I'm with social services. I was hoping I might ask you a few questions about the incident yesterday at school."

Was that really her name? He didn't think it was. She had to be lying to Veronica. He knew her. The blonde. She was cold and cruel, sometimes worse than Papa when he misbehaved, and she'd recommended killing him as he was too much of a threat.

They'd found Veronica. He had to do something about this.

Veronica opened the door nervously, not sure what to expect. She'd prefer a door-to-door salesman if at all possible, though Betty would be great and even Heather Chandler better than anyone after him. She wished he hadn't distracted her before they'd settled on a name. He needed one, and she was not calling him Nine.

"Veronica Sawyer?"

She didn't like this. Why were they asking for her?

"Yes. Can I help you?"

"My name is Margaret Newcombe," the blond said. "I'm with social services. I was hoping I might ask you a few questions about the incident yesterday at school."

Shit, this was about him. "Incident?"

"The fire in the lunchroom."

"Oh. That. Um..." Veronica couldn't help the frown. "Why would

social services care about that? I mean, Kurt and Ram got burned, but that's for a doctor, maybe a policeman to deal with, not social services."

"I'm afraid there may be more to it than that, and if you'd let us in—"

She shook her head, not about to let them in. "I don't know what I could tell you about any of it. I was walking away with my friends when the fight started. I barely saw any of it. Ask someone who was closer to that table because I don't even know what that was about."

"We have, actually, and it would seem it was about you."

"Me?" Veronica didn't know where that idea came from. That was ridiculous. "You're joking, right?"

"According to some of the other students, the young men in question were upset that the new kid had spoken to you and you seemed to like him. You were flirting with him."

Veronica flushed. "Um... well, he was kind of cute, but it was... I just asked him about the lunch time poll. I didn't even know... Kurt and Ram didn't do that over me. They—Ram's dating Heather McNamara. Kurt could have anyone. He wouldn't care, and it was one conversation."

"One that gave them the impression you were interested in him."

Veronica folded her arms over her chest. "I asked him a lame ass question. He said it was the stupidest thing he'd ever heard, and he was right. Asking what you'd do with a five million dollar inheritance if aliens invaded and threatened to destroy the world? Stupid as hell but it was Heather Chandler's question so no one argued with it. I thought his reaction to it was funny, and I smiled. Heather dragged me away, and that was the end of it. It is not what you're making it seem."

"I see. Then he hasn't tried to make contact with you since?"

"No one's seen him since he ran from the cafeteria after setting Kurt and Ram on fire."

"Well, if he does make contact, please let us know immediately."

"Again, why does social services cares so much?" Veronica asked. "And stop looking at me like that. My IQ is one twenty-five. I'm not an idiot, though it doesn't take a genius to know you're not telling me everything. Keep your card and get off my porch."

"Mr. Dean died in a fire at his home last night," the woman said as Veronica started to shut the door. "There is concern his son was involved in his death. He could be very dangerous, possibly mentally ill. We're all working to find him."

"Well, good luck with that," Veronica said, shutting the door. She forced herself to walk away from it, calmly, no running, no shaking, no sign at all that she'd just been rattled to the core.

She believed him. They experimented on him, and he could control fire. They were hunting him. They'd come here looking for him.

He caught her arm as she reentered the kitchen, and she almost freaked, but he covered her mouth and put his lips next to her ear, barely making any noise. She wouldn't have heard him if he hadn't been right up next to her. "They won't leave. They'll be watching you. Listening. Don't say anything. Don't let them know I'm here."

She nodded, pulling his hand off her mouth. "God, I need a cigarette."

November 4

"You don't have to go to school if you're not up to it," Joyce said, looking over at her niece. "It was a really rough night for all of us, and I'm sure if you—"

"It's better than sitting here staring at the walls all day," Veronica said, though she pulled her sweater tighter around her and then winced.

"Are you sure you don't want to go to the hospital? If Lonnie hurt you

—”

“No hospital,” Veronica said, and Joyce flinched at her tone. She really didn't know what to do, not for any of them. Will's friends hadn't taken him in overnight, though they'd been on the radio so late that Jonathan had taken refuge in the living room instead, falling asleep on the couch, and Joyce kept making the rounds, checking on all of them over and over again, but she hadn't helped, not once.

She was even to blame for this. If she'd put Lonnie off better, if she'd told him there was no money, if she'd never dated him or slept with him in the first place—no. She wouldn't think about that. The past was the past. Lonnie was out of their lives, and he would stay out this time.

“Mom, you're gonna be late,” Jonathan reminded her, and she winced. Donald would not be happy about yesterday. She'd been so caught up in what happened at her house and had forgotten to call him to say she'd been called to an emergency.

“Okay, okay. I'm—Where's Will? Is he—”

“He grabbed a piece of toast and booked it out of here already,” Jonathan said. “I'll get Veronica to school when she's ready.”

“Can go now,” Veronica said, rising. “Not hungry.”

“Um, sweetie,” Joyce began. “Those are the clothes I gave you last night, and I'm pretty sure you slept in them.”

Veronica looked down and tugged on her shirt. “Oh.”

Joyce had a feeling she was behind on laundry again, and while she could count on Jonathan to make sure he and Will had fresh clothes, she was responsible for her own and Veronica's, since her niece hadn't been up to sharing in the household chores, not that Joyce had ever asked if Veronica even knew how to use a washing machine and was a bit afraid to leave her alone to find out. She couldn't afford a disaster, and Will's first attempt with said machine had flooded nearly the whole house.

She needed a reminder to do that later. And she had to call that

lawyer and she needed to know what Hop was going to do about Lonnie. And she might just be fired if Donald was really angry about yesterday.

"Keys," Jonathan said, handing them to her, and she forced a smile as she took them and went for the door, telling herself the kids would be fine and knowing she was lying to herself. She had to be the worst mother on the planet.

"You're telling us she blew up a car?"

Will shrugged. "I know it sounds crazy, and none of them believe me, but it wasn't on fire, and then she said it was burning and the car exploded. I saw it. There wasn't anyone near it, but it went like... supernova. Or like someone had fireballed it."

"That's not possible," Lucas said. "You can't do that sort of thing in real life."

"I don't know," Dustin said. "She is a vampire, right? Vampires have extra powers. We don't know that she can't light stuff on fire at will."

Lucas looked at him. "Seriously? I know his cousin is a total freak, and we've all seen it because when we were over all she did was stare at the walls and occasionally mutter to herself, didn't know we were there, and we call her the vampire, but she does not have superpowers."

"Did you ask Jonathan what happened to the car?" Mike asked. "Maybe they told him since he went out with the chief after they took your dad away."

Will grimaced. He didn't want to think about that, either. He didn't like his dad much, though he didn't hate him as much as Jonathan and his mom did. And the guy had hurt Veronica, so he had to be stopped. He just found it hard to think about his dad being in jail.

"No, Jonathan didn't say what caused the fire. Mom didn't either. I don't think they know."

"I have a question," Dustin said. "Why didn't you bring this up last

night when we were on the radio? If you thought your cousin blew up a car—”

“Like I could say that in the same house as her. Even if she didn't hear it, there was Jonathan and Mom to hear it, and I told you—none of them believed me when I said it before. Mom would just get mad at me repeating it.”

“Yeah,” Mike agreed. “Between my mom and Nancy, I'm in the doghouse for calling her vampire at dinner.”

Lucas frowned. “You were talking about Will's cousin at dinner?”

“Shut up. It's not like that,” Mike protested. “Nancy's actually... being nice to the vampire. She wants to take her shopping today. They're going to go to the mall.”

Will snorted. “That's not going to happen. Cousin Creepo spent the night staring at the wall again after she got out of the bath.”

“Dude, your dad attacked her. I think just about anyone would stare at the wall after that,” Lucas said, and Dustin nodded in agreement. “I mean, there was that time before your dad took off—”

“Don't talk about that,” Will said, tensing up. He didn't want to remember that night. His dad had been screaming at his mom all night, and she'd screamed back, that was nothing new, even the things breaking weren't new, but things ended up worse than usual. He'd hidden in Jonathan's room, huddled in his big brother's arms and crying like a baby he was so scared. He didn't want to think about that, either.

“We don't have to,” Mike said. “We were just—you know what, maybe we should go back to the plans for the campaign.”

“Yeah, well, we'll be lucky if my mom lets me out of the house at all after yesterday.”

“You think she won't let you play? You'd be perfectly safe at my house, and she'll be working anyway. She always works doubles on the weekends because those other jerks want it off. There's no good reason why you shouldn't be able to come. Your dad's locked up,

right? So it's fine.”

“I don't know.”

“You got out of the house early today, and if Mike's sister takes the vampire shopping, then your mom will have no reason not to let you play Dungeons and Dragons,” Dustin said.

“So, Mike... how do we get Nancy to take one for the party?”

“People are staring even worse today,” Nancy said, and Barb nodded. She didn't like it, but it was obvious. The rumors were going strong again, and everyone seemed to be whispering about Veronica. Even they were, though Barb wanted to believe it was different. They were concerned. The others were feeding on her pain.

“Did Mike tell you anything of what actually happened? I mean, Will Byers is his best friend, so he'd be in a position to know.”

Nancy shook her head. “Mike and I don't really talk, and I was pretty pissed at him for calling her a vampire at dinner, so I ignored him all night.”

“He called her a vampire?”

Nancy nodded. “Apparently they all do, all his nerd friends. He kept trying to tell Mom about Steve, too, so I was really not happy with him. I didn't even know anything had happened until this morning when Carol said something about it.”

“Oh, God. What did she say?”

“You don't want to know.”

“Nance, just tell me.” Barb probably didn't want to know, but she had to know what she was up against if she was going to talk to Veronica, and she planned on it as soon as the lunch bell rang.

“Carol said she'd... taken Joyce's place, you know... with Lonnie. Steve actually told her off, said Lonnie got arrested for being drunk and hurting her, but she and Tommy laughed about it anyway.”

Barb really hated Carol. She didn't know how Nancy could be so interested in dating a guy who considered her a friend, even if she was only a friend because she was dating his friend. Tommy was no better than she was, and it didn't say much for the kind of person Steve was.

“Mom gave me fifty dollars.”

“What? For a new top?”

“No, I only got ten for that,” Nancy said. “She... I had mentioned that I wanted to get Veronica something when we went shopping, and Mom said to get at least two nice outfits if not more if I could find some reasonably priced ones.”

Barb had decided to give up her ten dollar allotment to get Veronica something, since she wasn't trying to impress any boys and figured none of them would look twice at her anyway, if she even wanted them to, which she didn't know that she did. Still, she had a feeling Veronica wouldn't take it.

“She's going to be pissed at both of us if we offer.”

“So we don't offer. We just... get her to try something on and if we can tell she likes it, buy it behind her back and make sure she goes home with it. I think we have to at least try.”

Barb nodded. She agreed, since it wasn't right Veronica was wearing Joyce's clothes. It had to make the rest of it harder—losing her parents, being in a strange place, living with strangers, having nothing left of her old life.

The bell rang, and Nancy rose out of her chair. “Let's go find her.”

“She had a pack of cigarettes earlier. She's probably outside.”

Nancy grimaced. “I kind of wish she didn't smoke. Wait, she stole a whole pack from Joyce?”

“I don't know. I just know I was going to talk to her at her locker, but she grabbed the pack and bolted outside before I could. And of course, everyone was laughing again.”

“Right. They said someone set Lonnie Byers' car on fire. They probably blame her now, just because she smokes.”

Barb figured Veronica was going to get blamed for anything even remotely wrong in this town until she left it, like her aunt was, and she hoped she was wrong, but she didn't think she was.

They found Veronica exactly where she'd been yesterday, smoking, her eyes closed as if she was trying to ignore everyone else at the school.

“Veronica?”

“Did you come to gawk at the freak?” Veronica asked, opening her eyes and glaring at them. “Because I've had enough of that already. I'd forgotten how fucking small this town was. It's worse than Sherwood. Even when Heather told everyone Rich Tanner had the clap it didn't get around that fast, and she controlled that place like her own personal kingdom.”

“Um... that really wasn't—we did want to make sure you were okay,” Nancy said. “Really. The rumors are all over the place, but whatever happened last night—”

“I didn't burn his car. I'm not sleeping with my aunt's ex-husband. And no one died. Not sure where that one came from, but there sure are a hell of a lot of people here I wouldn't miss if they were gone.” Veronica winced, covering her face with her hand. “Go away. I don't... I can't do this.”

“Did he hurt you?”

Veronica shook her head. “Not... not like... it wasn't... that. He thought I was my aunt, but he didn't... nothing like that. Okay? Just... Fuck.”

She slid down along the wall, burying her face in her knees.

“Hey,” Barb said, kneeling next to her. “It's okay. They locked him up, and he can't do anything to you now.”

Veronica looked up at her, eyes haunted. “That shit is easy to say.

Not so easy to believe.”

“You're worried he's going to come after you again?”

Veronica snorted. “No. I'm just... never going to be okay again. Not normal. Not... you should have seen my aunt... I scared her. I scare everyone. And I don't mean to, but I can't stop and... I keep hoping that it's not... I see little signs, and I make more of them than they are... that way I'm not crazy. It's stupid. I thought... I'd come out of that haze... it would be better because there was a fire and that meant... God, I don't even know what it meant.”

“You were scared. It must have been—”

“It was like them, trying to take me again, only... only this time there wasn't a fire and... and then there was but it... Why didn't I just die that night? Why am I still even here?”

Barb exchanged a look with Nancy. *Tried to take her?*

Nancy shrugged helplessly before she moved to put an arm around Veronica. “You didn't deserve to die. And no one deserves Lonnie Byers. Trust me. My brother's been friends with Will for years. I know what he was like before he left. They're all better off without him.”

“Yeah.”

“Um... this may not be anything you want to do or the right idea, but we were going to go over to the mall later. You want to come with us?”

“There's no mall in Hawkins.”

“No, we have to go out of town for that, but Barb's parents already gave her permission to go, so we were going to go as soon as school was over,” Nancy said. “It might take your mind off all of this. Or... I suppose it could make it worse, like it did yesterday.”

“The mall... is... in another town?”

“Yes.”

“Then... yes. I want to go. I need to get out of this place.”

7. Chapter 7

Notes for the Chapter:

This is the only story I've managed to get updated for a bit, just... some crazy work scheduling and life interfering and I am not really looking forward to working an overnight tonight and want to quit, but I couldn't sleep when I was supposed to and wrote and so... here it is.

It's heavy on the past stuff. I needed to build to something I was going to do in the next parts, so... I went ahead and filled in another blank.

I did try to go to a small town mall that closed at six once. It was so strange to have the whole town just close up like that then. Where I live isn't huge, but it's a college town, so things tend to be open a lot later.

September 28

"I don't know if it's working," Veronica said, eying the stereo and then looking back at him. She was worried, and he didn't like seeing it. The worry hurt her, in a way, and he didn't want anything to hurt her. Ever. She was more than a little special to him.

He shrugged, not glad to have it on so loud, and the song was awful. *Teenage suicide, don't do it..*

He didn't like it at all. Other music was better. Not Bud's music. He had some weird stuff he worked out to, and he made him hate all of it. The stuff in the car was better, even if Bud usually griped because he couldn't find a station with his songs but he liked the things he found.

Or he did before Bud started using them against him. To have to pay so much for a stereo...

She put a hand on his face, drawing his attention back to her. "What's wrong? You think they'll come in anyway?"

He shook his head. "Not before they have proof, and they shouldn't be able to get much with only a directional mike. You didn't let them in the house, so... they don't have that."

She nodded, though she wasn't reassured and neither was he. He'd been trying to do as little talking as possible, make as little noise, not moving much, trying to keep his presence small just in case. He knew that he had to leave, but with them definitely watching the house, it would put Veronica at risk if he tried it. The only safe way now was a firewalk, but it would take more than what her fireplace would allow, and even if that was enough, the lab would hurt her.

She knew about him. She'd hidden him. They'd make her pay for that.

"Will you go when it's darker?" she asked, looking at the window.

"Maybe. It's still not safe if they're watching, but it might be enough to go in the dark."

She curled up against him, sighing. "I don't want you to go. I mean... isn't it safer if you just... stay? They'd have to stop watching after a few days. When they leave, you can go. It'll be safer then, but until then... you can be here. With me."

He touched her cheek. "I would stay forever if it was safe. It's not safe."

She nodded. "I know. I just... I'll miss you and worry about you, and I don't want you to go because you still won't be safe and—"

He stopped her with another kiss, not wanting her to go on about all the bad he knew he still had to face when he left. She was the only one who'd ever been genuinely kind to him since he left the lab, and none of the people in the lab were nice at all, not really. Papa pretended, but it was a lie like Bud's lies and he didn't ever want to go back.

They'd hurt him if he did, but if he could stay free, maybe someday when she wasn't here, he could come back to her.

No, he couldn't. Not ever. It wouldn't be safe, not if they thought he cared about her. And he did.

She pulled back and curled up on his chest. "I hate this. I wish there was a way to make it safe for you. I want you here. I want... Oh, God, that's stupid, but I think I'd want you to be the first."

"What?"

"It's... Never mind."

He frowned. Never mind? That expression still didn't really make sense to him, even though he'd heard it used before. She gave him a small smile and snuggled closer, and he couldn't really think about what that word meant because he could only think about her.

He would miss her. A lot.

And the hamster. At least they'd be together.

"Music off," her mother ordered through the door. "Dinner, Veronica. Now."

She sounded pissed, and Veronica wouldn't be surprised if she was. It was pretty late, and if she was shouting through the door, she had probably called half a dozen times before coming upstairs and then having to pound on the door when it was locked. That never went over well, and she knew it, but she couldn't risk her parents just walking in on them in her bed, even if they were just holding each other and kissing occasionally.

"I better go down and eat," she said. "You'll still be here when I get back, right?"

He nodded. "Still not safe."

She hoped he wasn't lying to her, but she was afraid he might be, trying to make this easier for the both of them. She turned off the

stereo, opening the door and stepping out, closing it shut behind her.

"You have that music way too loud. You know better than that even if we were gone most of the day," her mom said as she started back downstairs. "You could have been doing anything while you were up there."

"Oh, yeah, Mom. I've got a boy here and we've been going at it like rabbits all day," Veronica said, rolling her eyes. The best way to put her mom off stuff like this was to tell something close to the truth and make it seem ridiculous, like that time Heather Chandler decided they were playing a drinking game with their croquet and Veronica spent the night in the bathroom hurling up every last drop she'd had. She'd said it was because she got completely wasted and had a lesbian orgy with the Heathers and her mother had told her it must have been food poisoning and thrown out the food she'd made the night before.

"Not funny, Veronica."

"You act like I do terrible things if I don't go out of the house. I swear, you seem to think I get up to worse stuff in my bedroom than I do out with the Heathers."

"In this case, she might be right," her dad said. He wasn't smoking or reading one of his books, and Veronica frowned, feeling very uneasy all of a sudden. "A woman came up and spoke to us when we got home."

"Was she selling Tupperware?"

"You know damned well she wasn't," her mom said, and Veronica swallowed, bothered by her slip. Her mom didn't cuss around her, and her dad kept it to his 'damn, why do I do this' jokes most days. "She said she spoke to you and you seemed unwilling to listen to the danger you could be in."

"What? Just because I talked to some kid in the cafeteria yesterday does not mean that—"

"They're pretty sure that boy killed his father in that fire and that he

might come after you. He's apparently... fixated. They said neighbors heard a fight between the two of them before the fire started," her mom said. "Veronica, this is serious. You can't ignore this. That boy could hurt you. All of us. And you're acting like it was a joke."

"Because they are exaggerating what happened yesterday. I spoke to him for less than five minutes. I don't see how I could possibly be so important to him."

"Until we're sure, you're not going out of the house without one of us. Not that I—we both think it might be better to leave town for a while."

"What? This is ridiculous."

"We're going. As soon as we finish supper."

Veronica shook her head. "I'm not hungry."

"Sit down and eat."

"No." She wasn't staying here a minute longer, and she wasn't eating. She wasn't leaving town. "You are way overreacting. There is no proof he has any kind of fascination with me at all. There's been no creepy hang ups on the phone, no shadows in the yard. Nothing."

"The ladder had been moved up by your window."

Fuck. She'd forgotten about that. Damn her second story bedroom. "I did that. I... Heather and I had a big fight and I was going to sneak out and try and apologize to her."

"We're not taking any chances," her mom said. "This is for your own safety. As soon as we're gone, they're going to search the whole house just in case he did come in."

"If you're so scared, why didn't you already have them do that?" Veronica asked. She didn't want them to, no, not really, because they would find him or force him to fight them, but her parents weren't making sense.

"They asked us to go about our normal routine for now, up until we

left.”

“Right. Sure. That makes so much sense.”

“Veronica—”

“I’m done, okay? Not hungry, pissed off, and maybe a little scared thanks to you. I’m going back to my room. I guess I have to pack.”

She turned and ran up the stairs, not stopping even as they called after her. She had to warn him, and they had to figure out how to keep him safe. She didn’t know how, not when they were about to drag her away, but she had to try.

He looked up from petting the hamster as she came in, and she almost couldn’t breathe through her relief to find he hadn’t already run. “What’s wrong?”

“They got to my parents. They’ve convinced them you’re a psychotic killer who burned your father to death last night and are stalking me now and my parents want to take me out of town. They’re going to search the house as soon as we leave.”

He nodded. “I should go.”

“This sucks. There has to be some other way to—”

“No. I have to go. I should have already gone.”

She shook her head, going to her desk and starting to rifle through it. She couldn’t just let him go without anything. Maybe if she could find some candy or something stupid to remember her by, that would be enough. She had paper and pens and her diary and—oh. The monocle. She’d thought that was so cool when she found it, but it was stupid.

“Here,” she said, bringing it over to him. “I want you to have this. So you don’t forget me.”

He frowned as she draped the chain over his neck. “I couldn’t anyway.”

"I know, but... I wanted you to have something of mine."

He reached over and cupped her cheek, leaning his head against hers. "I gave you something of mine."

She laughed. "Um, I'm not so sure the hamster is the same, but okay."

He gave her a short kiss, transferring Slushie to her lap. "I should go."

She nodded unhappily, wishing she'd been able to use her useless genius to find some way to allow him to stay. She hadn't. She couldn't. She'd lost him, and they'd barely even started. She tugged on his coat.

"Make me a promise."

"What?"

"When it's safe, or when they stop watching me, when they aren't around to hunt you—I don't care what—just... this isn't the last time, is it? You'd come back for me. Say you would."

He touched her cheek with both his hands. "I'd always come for you if I could."

That had to be enough. She could live with that hope, right? It sucked, but it was better than nothing. "One last time?"

"Kiss or snuggle?"

"Both."

He gave her a sad smile and leaned in to kiss her, holding her tight against him. She wanted to keep him here, but she knew she couldn't. She wanted this kiss to last forever, but since it was them and once they got started it just grew, building and getting more intense and she really did think that she wanted to know what it would be like to do a lot more with him.

"Veronica, we need to—oh, my god. He is here."

“Shit,” Veronica whispered.

“Stand up. Get back from her. Don't you dare hurt her. Go tell them he's here.”

Veronica started to rise, needing to stop that before her parents did something really stupid. “No, don't, Mom, please. It's not what you think.”

“You're blinded by him and hormones. You're not thinking straight.”

“You're the one that's not thinking straight. They aren't going to just arrest him and—”

He put a hand on her arm, stopping her. “Too late. They're already inside.”

“What? How do you know that?”

He had forgotten she turned off the radio when she left. He had noticed and liked the silence, but he hadn't thought about its implication. The men outside listening for him had known the minute she came back into the room, and they would have moved as soon as they did. They were trained. He knew that. One of the men who'd come along before Bud, he'd said the guys moved like men in his old company and said it was part of an army. He'd almost been decent, explaining he just needed that itch scratched sometimes that no one else could, and he'd actually given the money unlike a lot of the others who didn't after he'd tried to fight them off.

He couldn't think about that now. He just always remembered that the men—women, too, the blonde wasn't the only woman—who came after him were always trained. They were dangerous.

“Look, kid, we can make this really simple and easy. You just leave quietly, don't hurt our daughter, and we'll forget all of this.”

“You'll have to,” he said. “If they thought for a second you knew the truth, they'd kill you.”

“What?”

He moved toward the window, looking down. Someone had taken the ladder, and while the fall wouldn't kill him, he couldn't afford to get hurt in it. "Shit."

"I can't believe you let a stranger into our house like this," the woman said, and Veronica shook her head, frustrated. "Sneaking in through windows should have been enough of a sign—"

"Seriously? Any normal boyfriend I had would have tried the same thing, and I'm glad he's not normal."

He touched her arm. "Stop saying you know about that. Pretend you don't. Lie to them. Let them think... you believe their story. The lie. If you believe the lie, you're safe. They won't hurt you. The truth, it gets you killed."

She shook her head. "No. It's wrong. What they did to you was wrong and what they're—"

"No. It's not worth losing you," he insisted. He swallowed, hearing footsteps pounding on the stairs. He should take the window. He had to. No other choice except exposing what he was.

The men burst into the room, and the woman shrieked, backing into her husband and shaking, while he tried to calm her. The men didn't even look at her, their guns and eyes on him.

"You're coming with us."

He shook his head, taking another step toward the window. "You know I won't go back to that place. You won't make me."

"Don't move. We will shoot you if we have to."

"No," Veronica said, moving in front of him and making the woman screech again. "You can't do that. He didn't do anything."

"You don't know what he's capable of. He's very dangerous. Move away from him. Now."

"I know enough. You didn't come in here like police. You're supposed to announce yourself. You didn't. And that woman who's supposedly

a social worker? Yeah, right. She's a liar. You're all liars. You're scaring my parents and threatening to shoot an unarmed kid. Listen to yourselves. You're the bad guys here."

"Veronica, get away from him, please."

"Mom, this is all wrong. Even if he did what they said he did, it is," she insisted. "They're lying. You know why he came here? So I would take in his hamster. That's all. He knew he had to run and wanted a place for a defenseless hamster. This is so fucked up it's beyond wrong."

"Step away from him."

"Would you really shoot through me?"

He gagged. "Veronica, they will. They're not about to let me go even if it means killing all three of you. Just... stop. Please."

She shook her head. She was being too stubborn. He had no choice. If he didn't go, they'd kill them, though for now the lie could hold if Veronica would be smart about it and say she believed it. He had his hand on the window when the gun went off, and more people screamed. He cried out when it hit him, the pain tearing through his arm and making him fall against the wall.

"Veronica," the woman said, grabbing for her to drag her away from him.

"You almost shot my daughter, you idiot. I don't care if he's trying to run—"

Another shot rang out as he dragged himself back onto his feet, and he saw the man slide down the wall, a hole in the middle of his head. The woman shrieked, and Veronica stared at them in disbelief.

"What the hell, Connor? The situation could have been maintained."

"You shot the kid in front of them and almost killed the girl. It was not maintained."

He looked at the two soldiers arguing and knew that they were going

to kill Veronica and the woman now. They had to. And he couldn't let them.

He raised his hand, using the uninjured one and concentrated, throwing the fire out onto all of the soldiers at once, hearing them scream in pain, one of them firing his gun in his panic. Something hit him hard in the side, and he swore, falling down and losing control of the fire.

“Mom?” Veronica asked in a shaky voice. “Mom?”

He dragged himself toward her, seeing the hamster on the floor and shoving it in his pocket as he forced himself closer. “Veronica...”

She looked over at him. “They killed my parents.”

He nodded. He knew that. He also knew he was going to die and she would, too, if they didn't get out of here. “I think... I think I have enough to get the fire strong... and I can get us out... maybe... Slushie was okay earlier... but... I don't... It could kill you.”

She looked over at the soldiers. “They will, won't they?”

“Yeah.”

“Then do it.”

So he did. He put a hand to the floor and spread the fire through the whole house, feeling through it to see he'd caught more soldiers in it downstairs. He forced the doors and windows to fuse even as he felt his control slipping away again as the pain in his body got worse. He was going to die, but he had to get Veronica out of here.

He grabbed hold of her, feeling her shake in his arms, and then he sent them both into the fire.

The world seemed to shift around her. One minute she was in her bedroom, in his arms but next to her mom's body and she couldn't stop feeling that horror, that disbelief—her parents were dead, how could they be dead—they'd been arguing over dinner and she'd been so mad and thought they were so stupid and now—oh, God, she'd as

good as killed them. If she'd just done what he said and pretended she believed the lie about him stalking her, she could have saved her parents.

She stopped, staring out at the strangeness around her. Everything had gone red and looked like it was burning around them, even the sky, and she swallowed, trying to understand. He groaned and rolled back from her, and she got a good look at him and the blood, the strange and sickening look of it in this light.

“No,” she whispered, and then the world changed again, and she was on her back in her yard.

She stared up at the house, seeing it completely engulfed in flames, burning out of control, knowing her parents were inside there. Dead, but burning away anyway.

She choked on a sob, trying to understand how she'd lost everything in a few seconds, and then someone grabbed hold of her, and she screamed, trying to free herself, pounding on the arms and scratching, squirming for her life.

Something sharp poked her arm, and she looked over to see the fake social worker standing there, a needle in her hand.

“Idiots,” she muttered, and Veronica stared at her. Was she supposed to die now? Was that what that drug was? She did feel strange, and she was going to fall. She was all rubbery and couldn't keep herself from sliding about and everything was heavy but loose and floppy. She couldn't think and everyone looked funny.

“You sure about this? She probably saw all of it.”

“Of course she did, you fucking moron,” the blonde snapped. “But if there's any chance Nine survived that, he'll find her again. She's bait. He'll come to us this time and we'll finish things properly, like we should have before he got this far.”

Veronica shook her head. She wasn't bait. She wouldn't let them use her. She had to get free, but her whole body felt strange, and she couldn't get loose. The fire burned so bright, her house crumbling

into ash.

And she saw darkness.

November 4

No explanation for it.

The fire chief's words kept repeating in Hop's head as he opened the door to the general store. He saw Donald give him a dark look, and he almost gave the old man the finger. Figured he'd be an ass about what happened yesterday. Oh, he'd acted like such a kind man, generous and shit, but he worked Joyce to the bone and always gave her shit when she needed time off for her kids. Hop suspected she hadn't gotten a raise in years and that the new guy made more than she did even with her seniority and obvious need, but then she was just the town slut who should have known better than to sleep around and deserved what she got for picking Lonnie Byers.

Hop hated this town so damned much sometimes. If his life hadn't gone to complete shit, he'd never have come back here again. She was just about the only part of this place that was ever good, but that was high school and they were both so far gone from that it was not worth thinking about.

Joyce saw him and winced, looking a bit like she wanted to run, but she wasn't that sort. She swallowed and faced him. "Hop."

"Need you for a minute."

She nodded. "Donald, I'm going to take my break now."

"Fifteen minutes," the man said. "Remember, I have to leave, and Jeffery won't be in until late to close."

She nodded, looking a bit upset by those words. She grabbed her sweater and followed Hop outside to the bench.

He dug out a cigarette and passed it to her. "He's a dick."

“He's not that bad.”

“Compared to Lonnie, maybe,” Hop muttered, and she looked at him, eyes wide and horrified, and he cursed himself for the idiotic remark. “You know that's why I'm here. I need statements from you and the boys and Veronica.”

“What?”

“Joyce, don't. Not this time. You can't just tell me to let it go. I want to take this thing all the way to court. I want him sentenced and serving time.”

“No one's going to—”

“The idiots that would have looked the other way when you were married to that jackass can't do that now. This isn't some thing they think should stay between husbands and wives. He went after your niece, a girl who is already traumatized and hurting, and he scared the shit out of her. He might have let her go when you showed up, but that's no excuse. And don't think you can just tell her that he won't come back because he will. He'll say he wants to make it right, and he'll pretend he's doing it, and it'll be just like before prom when you took his lying ass back the first time. He's got a pattern. You know it. I know it. You said yourself he wants her money. He won't quit.”

Joyce put her hand to her head. “What did he say?”

Hop grunted. “He spent the first few hours he was in there raving about crazy bitches burning his car. I think he bought into that idea your son had about it being her because she flashed back there. Joyce, she's not safe if he's out there. And neither are you.”

Joyce sighed, taking a drag and letting it out. “You don't know how bad it will get if it goes to trial, Hop. He'll throw every mistake I've ever made with the kids in there, and they'll drag up everything that happened when her parents died, and people already talk about us, but they'll make it worse. They'll say she... did it. They'll think he... molested her or something.”

Hop bit back saying they already did. The station was one of the worst places for gossip, even if Flo officially denied allowing it. Powell and Callahan had too much time on their hands, and so did a lot of others. “All the more reason to set the record straight. Get it down for all to know the truth.”

“I don't know, Hop, that's a lot to—Veronica?” Joyce rose, and he frowned to see the girl coming toward them. She'd gotten out of a little VW Rabbit, and it looked like some other girl was behind the wheel.

Veronica tried to force a smile. “Um... hi. I was...”

“Is Jonathan with you? What's wrong?”

“Oh. I didn't...” Veronica flinched. “I forgot to talk to him about it. He's going to be worried.”

“That Barb Holland and Nancy Wheeler you're with?” Hop asked, finally remembering where he knew those kids from. He'd gone to school with Karen Wheeler, same as Joyce, and he only sort of knew the Hollands but that redhead was easily familiar, especially since people talked behind her back, too, saying the mailman was her father or something because neither of her parents had that hair or those freckles.

Veronica nodded. “They wanted to take me to the mall.”

Joyce stared at her. “There's no mall in Hawkins.”

“I know. That's why I want to go. We were about to go, but then Barb asked if I'd asked you, and I hadn't... I... my parents... I don't... not used to asking...”

Jesus. Hop thought she might start crying again.

“I'm not sure that's such a good idea after last night, Veronica. You —”

“That's why I want to go,” the girl said. “They're all talking about me again, and I hate it here, and I just want... Can't I just pretend I'm normal for a few hours?”

Damn. Hop would give her just about anything after that one. He was glad he wasn't her father. He'd have been just as bad as with Sara, wanting to give her anything. Everything. His little girl was gone, though, and she wasn't coming back.

"I need you to do something for me first," Hop told her, and Joyce turned on him with a bunch of angry words about to spill out of her mouth. He held up a hand. "Look, I know this is the last thing either of you want to deal with, but we need to know exactly what he did so we can make sure we get the charges right and keep him locked up and away from you. I know you didn't think you needed a doctor yesterday, but bruises take a bit sometimes, and if you have that or anything else—"

"Hop, you bastard—"

"I'm sorry, but if we wait and don't get this done right, he'll get away with what he did, and I'm not having that, Joyce. Not again." He faced the girl. "I need you to give me a statement and get yourself looked at by a doctor so I can have their statement, too."

"A hospital?" That seemed to freak her out, and Joyce reached for her, glaring daggers at him as she tried to calm her.

"Not a hospital," he said. "The local family physician will be enough if that's what you're worried about."

He looked at Joyce. What was with the hospital phobia, anyway?

"No hospital," Veronica insisted. "No drugs."

Shit, had they sedated her against her will after the fire? Was that it? Oh, sure, she was probably really upset, maybe hysterical, but after watching her house burn like that, who wouldn't be?

"No drugs. Your aunt can be with you the whole time."

Veronica bit her lip, looking back at the car. "Won't be able to do both. Mall closes at six in small towns. They told me that."

That was true, though Hop knew he needed the evidence sooner rather than later so no one could accuse them of making it up, which

knowing Lonnie he would. "Wouldn't tomorrow be better anyway? You'd have the whole day there."

"Maybe not a ride."

"I'll drive you myself," he said, and that got a bit of a smile out of Joyce, even if it was stupid and he knew it. The girl didn't want to go with him. This was about being normal, and normal meant shopping with other girls. "Hold on a minute, okay?"

She just looked at him, and he forced a smile as he walked over to the car. Nancy rolled the window down nervously.

"Chief. Is... is everything okay?"

"Yeah. I just figured I'd take it on myself to ask you if you'd be willing to put this trip of yours off until tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"I need Veronica to give a report on yesterday and see a doctor about what Lonnie did. Time that's done, you'd get there just in time for the mall to close."

"Did he really hurt her?" Barb asked. "She said... well, all she said was that it wasn't like that, but the rumors going around the school say he... you know..."

"Forced himself on her?"

"Yeah."

Hop shook his head. This fucking town sometimes. "She was dressed when we got there, but he had a good hold on her, one Jonathan couldn't break, so I figure she got a few bruises at least. She should be fine."

"Okay."

"Look, I'll even make it worth your while to take her tomorrow if that would help."

"What?" Nancy asked. "Are you trying to—"

"We don't need anything extra to change the plans," Barb said. "We'd much rather know he was locked up for good, wouldn't we, Nance? And didn't we both say it would be better if we could go on the weekend? I'm sure if your mom and my mom knew why we were changing the plans, they'd still be okay with us going, and we can look at more stores."

"Exactly," Hop said. "And if you swing by the station before picking her up, I'll give you something to get her a few things. She could use something better than Joyce's stuff after all she's been through."

"Uh... thanks," Nancy began, and he shook his head.

"Don't mention it. Really, don't." He walked back to Joyce and Veronica, who were sitting on the bench. Veronica had started to fidget, and if he didn't know better, he'd swear she needed a fix.

Wait. Did he know better? Was it just because the clothes belonged to Joyce that the girl smelled like smoke, or was she like her aunt in that, too? Damn, he didn't know that he could handle that, seeing her as the spitting image of Joyce when they used to sneak cigarettes between fourth and fifth period.

"They said they'd go tomorrow if that's okay with you."

Veronica closed her eyes, but she forced a nod. "Okay."

"Let's go get you looked at by the doctor."

8. Chapter 8

Summary for the Chapter:

The aftermath of the fire and the doctor's visit.

Notes for the Chapter:

I didn't get to what I wanted to do just yet. I figured I had to address some of the emotional fall out of their day, and also I got hit by a work schedule disaster which led to me having a fourteen hour work day and a super bad migraine that will not go away or ease up very much. I finished this chapter up in between attempts to sleep it off (very unsuccessful ones) and the temptation to quit my job altogether. I figured I hurt just as much behind a computer screen as not, so I might as well. That way I actually do something as opposed to everything else I've tried, including going to work.

On the whole, it's a quiet chapter, might be migraine related in that it's subdued, but I liked Jonathan's thoughtfulness and Hop being suspicious seemed fitting.

September 29

“You're sure this is the proper course of action?” Brenner leaned back in his office chair, the phone up to his ear. He hadn't been very pleased with the report he'd been given. He expected better. While what happened in Sherwood was admittedly less than what Nine was now capable of, it was a mess, and he'd thought it would be contained after he put Dyer in charge. Frankly, he was disappointed in the woman.

Civilian casualties were almost expected, but it should not have been

so difficult to keep the Sawyers to the party line. According to her, they had accepted it. It was some trigger happy soldier who had ruined things, and he found that very more than a little disappointing.

“Yes.”

“It's unlike you. I thought you favored a lethal response.”

“Only when it's the most expedient course. This draws too much attention to us. One fire is explainable. Two fires...” She let that sit, not elaborating on it. “They've gone to the gas line story, and it seems to be holding as the cause for both of them despite the missing boy.”

“Yes, but this girl. She's a witness. It's not like you to leave one alive.”

“This one is different. It is a risk, but one I feel is necessary,” Dyer told him. “Tell me... Have you reviewed the full documentation on the Sawyer family?”

He eyed the folder on his desk. They had other plans for Eleven today, and he had no need to know of the girl Dyer had inexplicably left alive. She was not important to the grander scheme of things, and the recent developments with Elven had him wanting to focus all his energies on getting to the next step. He had a special presentation to arrange for their sponsors.

“Not yet.”

“You should. Pay particular attention to the mother.”

He leaned forward, opening the file to see the documentation. On the surface, the mother seemed completely ordinary, as she had before he looked into any of it. He was starting to feel annoyed, about to close the folder when he saw the woman's maiden name. Now why was that familiar?

“She was born in Hawkins and moved away,” Dyer said. “Her only living relative is a sister who still resides there.”

“You're saying the girl will come here, to us.”

“Basically. Everything we need for the trap is already in place. Should Nine have survived, if he chooses to seek her out, he will do so under our watchful eye.”

“Yes, that will be an advantage,” Brenner said, tapping on the folder. He was going to have to do more research of his own. The unlikeliness of this particular coincidence—Nine finding a girl descended from a Hawkins line, one of considerable notoriety—was high. The boy was not a precognitive, nor could he do half the telepathic feats Eleven was capable of, and certainly he was more of an overt weapon than Eight. Still, was it possible he had been drawn to something in that girl herself, a disposition not unlike the ones that had led to the children like him, Eleven, and Eight being taken to use to further their research?

Had they overlooked a great potential here in their backyard?

The aunt would bear watching, as would any children she might have. They would have that in place before the girl was delivered into their hands, of course, but this particular twist of fate could prove quite useful.

“You’re sure she won’t be able to tell them about what she saw?”

“They’ve dosed her heavily on hallucinogens. She’s been raving about all sorts of impossible things since she was given to the hospital. They’ve already put in a call to their psychiatric department.”

“She will be released into the custody of her aunt.”

“Yes. With the strong recommendation for a therapist we’ve selected. If anyone hears her story, they will simply think it the product of a traumatized mind.”

“And yet she was unscathed from the fire.”

“Was being the operative word. We made sure to give her a few scars as well.”

“Good. Keep me apprised of any changes. I’m looking forward to your return.”

“Call for you on line one, chief,” Flo said, and he groaned, wanting to remind her about coffee and contemplation, especially since it would be nothing bigger than garden gnomes or some other bullshit again.

Some days he missed being a real cop.

Some days he remembered everything else about the job—shitty hours, lots of death, and a family that couldn't understand him because he didn't dare let that into their world, not the world where his precious daughter lived, the girl who was everything to them. He didn't miss the death. He didn't miss the crime, but sometimes he did miss the challenge. Keeping busy might have helped, but then again, he'd blown any real shot at that in the bottle after Sara died.

He reached for the phone, knowing well enough Flo wasn't going to be put off. She'd either buzz again or force him to take it some other way. She felt it was important, and it probably was, in what passed for important in Hawkins, Indiana.

He lifted the phone to his ear. “This is Jim Hopper. What can I do you for?”

“Mr. Hopper, this is Detective Rhodes of the Sherwood police department. I've been trying to reach someone up there, but it seems their phone has been disconnected.”

Hop almost laughed. Of course the phone would be disconnected, wouldn't it? Any criminal with ties up here knew the easiest way to avoid being found by anyone outside town was the phone, though local gossip could find them faster than any phone call would have in the first place. “You think some former local boy came back to ground here?”

“Um, no, actually. I was hoping to locate someone for—”

“This isn't a criminal matter?”

“Not exactly.”

“Not exactly? What are we talking, then? Missing person?” Hop asked, leaning back in his chair. No one had gone missing in Hawkins—really missing—since 1923, and some said even that wasn't true

because that girl was straight up crazy. It ran in the family.

"I'm trying to find a woman named Joyce Byers. I understand she's the only living relation for Marion Sawyer."

"Far as I know, yeah," Hop agreed. He didn't know of any others seeing as their aunt had passed on a few years back and their parents had been gone for even longer. Christ, Marion Sawyer. He hadn't thought about her for years. Never liked her much. She'd put on airs even as a kid, trying to pretend things were so much better than they were at home, but if there was one thing that could be said about her, once she'd set her mind to something, she did it. She'd been determined to get out of this town, and she had done it. She hadn't even cared who she stepped on to do it, including her younger sister.

The mess she left Joyce with...

"Mrs. Sawyer and her husband died last night in a house fire," the detective on the other end said, drawing Hop back to the present.

"Damn." Hop said. Then he frowned. "Wait, wasn't there a kid?"

"The daughter survived. She has some bad burns and is in the hospital. I need to speak to Mrs. Byers as soon as possible."

"You were going to tell her that over the phone?" Hop asked, disgusted. Sure, he knew Joyce and Marion weren't close, but no one should get news like that on the phone. "I'll find her and speak to her. She'll be in touch."

He hung up and grabbed his hat.

"Mom, what are you doing?" Jonathan asked, frowning at her, and Joyce sighed as she looked up from the couch, not wanting to admit that she was hunting for her keys again. She knew she did it almost every morning, but she should be better about this, have fixed it somehow by now instead of having it be their running bad joke.

"I was going to—"

"I'm dropping you off, remember?"

She didn't. When had she agreed to that? "Um..."

"I'm going to change the oil in both cars after school today," he reminded her, and she winced. She had forgotten, but that was right. He'd told her he would, and while she used to worry about Jonathan making any repairs on either of their vehicles, especially the death trap he'd saved up for himself, she knew he was good at it, better than she'd been forced to be over the years.

"Right. Sorry. I forgot that was today."

He gave her that look again, the one that betrayed his disappointment in her inability to keep days straight, to know anything beyond her endless schedule of doubles at the store.

"We still get to listen to Jonathan's music in the car, right?" Will asked, picking up an apple off the counter. She had to smile. The boys had bonded over music, and while she didn't think anyone could love that Clash song as much as Will did, she found it sweet.

"Yes," Joyce said, though she still insisted there was nothing wrong with her taste in music. She ruffled his hair, looking over when she heard a car in the driveway.

She frowned, going to the door, her hand opening it as soon as she got close enough to see it was Hop's truck, the one that announced him as chief of police. Her boys were here, safe, so what could he possibly want?

She stepped out on the porch. Hop stepped down from the truck and shut the door behind her. Could this be about Lonnie? She had been expecting it, off and on, for years, but he'd never actually done her the favor of dying, just blowing through her money and chasing younger and younger women.

"Hop?"

"Joyce," he said, coming up to her, not climbing the porch step. She still had to look up at him. "Hear your phone got disconnected."

"What? When?" Shit, she'd forgotten to pay it, though admittedly it was lower on her list of priority bills than some others. Jonathan

never really used it, she was never home, and Will could talk to his friends on his radio if he needed to.

“Maybe as early as this morning,” he said, shrugging. Then he lost any semblance of being casual. “It’s not good news, Joyce. You want to sit down for this?”

“Is it Lonnie?”

“I said it wasn’t good news.”

She snorted. “Don’t make jokes, Hop.”

He gave her a short smile, coming up on the porch and taking her by the arm, leading her over to the swing. He helped her sit, taking the other side. This was familiar in other ways, some of them good, a lot of them stupid, and she wondered if he was getting nostalgic on her even as he gave her that intense look of his, the one that kicked her in the gut because he *meant* this, whatever he was going to say, and it was going to hurt.

“I got a call from the Sherwood police,” he said. “It’s about Marion.”

Joyce flinched. She didn’t really want to hear about her sister right now. “She and I don’t really talk these days and—”

“I know that,” Hop said. He didn’t look away from her, and that feeling got worse. “Joyce, she’s gone. Both of them are. There was a fire, took their house and them.”

She tried to breathe and couldn’t, gasping and grabbing hold of the swing’s chain, struggling to get air. This wasn’t true. She pretty much hated Marion, was only polite and civil the few times they did talk since Marion left, but that didn’t mean they weren’t sisters. Once they’d been close. It was only time and distance—abandonment again and again in times of need—that had soured their relationship to nothing.

She’d never forgive Marion for leaving her with her parents at the end, but that was... different.

“I need you to breathe for me,” Hop said, and she nodded, still

struggling but finding it easier to focus on his voice. He put a hand on her arm. "That's it. Just keep on doing that for me, okay?"

She wanted to roll her eyes, annoyed, but that was how he got her past this stuff before, using humor or anger to trick her out of panic. "Not about you."

"I know," he said. "Just... actually damned glad your phone wasn't working."

She winced. She didn't want to think about getting that kind of news on the phone, strained relationship or not. She might be okay if it was Lonnie. Maybe. Not Marion.

"Oh, God. Veronica. Was she in the fire, too? Is she—"

"She's alive. She's in the hospital. Got burned, is pretty shaken up from what they were willing to tell us," Hop said. "Flo called over as soon as I started here, and you know if there's anyone that's good at getting information, it's her."

Joyce nodded.

"Mom?" Jonathan asked, coming out onto the porch with Will, who looked spooked, his eyes wide. They must have thought the worst. "Are you—"

"Hop just told me your aunt Marion is dead," she said, pleased that her voice almost came out normal. "She... there was a fire."

Will frowned, looking up at Jonathan like he wanted an explanation for that. Jonathan was old enough to know the relationship there was complicated. "You know, the lame cards every year at Christmas?"

"The awful sweater ones with the bad puns?" Will said. "They haven't come in years. I guess I thought..."

He thought Marion was already dead. No, she'd just stopped bothering with the cards after Joyce told her off one year. She'd had no interest in the long letter of how things were that year for them when their biggest crisis was having the wrong bathroom tile delivered for a renovation and Joyce's house was currently flooded

from Lonnie's half-assed attempt at fixing a leak.

“What about Veronica?”

Will looked up at Jonathan, frowning. “Wait, her, too? She... she sent me five dollars last year.”

Joyce shook her head. “She's in the hospital, sweetheart. I... I don't know much more now. We're going to have to find out, okay? Um... can you let me finish talking to Hop now?”

“Yeah,” Jonathan said, leading his brother back inside the house.

Joyce swallowed, turning back to Hop. “Um... I need to talk to them. To the hospital. To... I... Am I all that girl has? Oh, fuck that. I have to go to her. Shit. I can't afford to travel and Donald won't let me take time off and—”

“One thing at a time. I've got a number for you to call the hospital. Let's start with that.”

Veronica tossed in her bed, feeling like something was crawling on her skin. She tried to get it off, but it wouldn't go away. They said it was nothing, and they kept telling her to put her blankets back on because that wasn't the problem, but she was burning up and she wasn't in the fire but she felt like she could still feel it.

Her arms were burned, and her legs, too. When she said she hadn't been burned in the fire, that she'd been safe in the red place, they just shook their heads. They seemed to think she couldn't understand her parents being dead, but she knew they were. They'd been murdered. She saw it. Well, no, she hadn't seen it. When her father was shot, she hadn't been looking at him, but she saw him afterward, and she couldn't forget it.

She didn't see her mom get hit, either, but she saw her not moving and she didn't answer and she stared so vacantly...

They said her parents died in a fire, a gas main explosion.

Trying to say otherwise just ended in her getting sedated, but when

she woke, she was back seeing things and feeling strange. She couldn't make it stop. She wanted to feel normal again, but they wouldn't let her. One drug after another, with apologies and it was such a shame what happened but she'd be okay if she just rested.

She couldn't stay awake, not when they kept saying she was hysterical and sedating her. She'd lost all track of time in here, and she couldn't tell if she actually slept or if they were just saying she had.

She didn't trust that nurse. She looked too much like the social worker, even if she was calling herself Helen now and the others seemed to think that only made Veronica crazier, since they all knew the woman was a nurse.

Veronica knew she was lying, but trying to tell anyone that didn't work. They kept giving her drugs and telling her that she needed rest.

She didn't want to rest. She wanted out of here. If she was free, she'd go far from Sherwood, far from anyone who knew her. She would find a safe place, not any of the ones he'd said he'd been to, and she'd make it her home.

And he could find her again because it would be safe.

She somehow knew he could, though how or why she didn't know beyond that, so it was probably just stupid wishful thinking. Still, with all he could do, he could find her, right?

Or was he dead, like her parents?

She remembered seeing him shot. She did see that happen, not once but twice, and he was bleeding. She came out of that other place, but he didn't.

He was dead.

He wasn't coming back to her again. Ever.

She turned onto her side and wept.

November 4

Will looked up as his mom came in the house with his cousin. Wasn't the vampire supposed to go shopping with Nancy and Barb? That was what they were hoping, and if his mom said no, then she was so going to say no to their Dungeons and Dragons plans this weekend.

Great.

"Here. You just sit down," his mom said ushering Veronica to the couch. "You were... I suppose you'll hate me if I say brave, but you were, so... um... I'm going to start on dinner. Is there anything you need?"

"A cigarette," Veronica muttered, and his mom stared at her.

"What?"

The vampire swallowed, like she'd somehow not realized what she said or how his mom would react to it. Will almost smiled, but then his cousin shrugged.

"I don't know. I got felt up, they took pictures of me, I figure... a cigarette after that is only natural, right?"

His mom winced. "The doctor did not feel you up."

Veronica didn't respond to that, just pulled her sweater around her tighter, and Will wondered how she could get away with saying stuff like that. Was it just because she hadn't been talking before? Or because she wasn't doing the creepy talking to herself thing?

Not that it always sounded like she was talking to herself. She mentioned missing people and how she wished she could see them again, which was sad, but also still creepy.

His mom sighed. "Look, I know it was hard, and I wish you hadn't gone through any of that. I'm sorry. You were... strong and brave, doing this, and I'm glad you did, even if it was hard and it shouldn't have happened. And tomorrow you can go to the mall with your friends and it will be a much better day with this behind us and...

Dinner. I'm going to make dinner now.”

“It's in the oven,” Jonathan called, coming down the hall to them. “Though... I didn't know everyone would be here. I thought Veronica was going out with Nancy and Barb.”

“Change of plans,” his mom said. “Hop asked her to give her statement and see the doctor.”

“Now I'm a photographed freak of nature,” Veronica said, shaking her head. “I'm not hungry. I'll just go—”

“Hold on,” Jonathan told her. “I have something for you.”

She frowned, and so did everyone else.

“I was going through the shed after I got home. Mom never gets rid of anything,” Jonathan said, and his mom reached for him, but he ducked her, a smile on his face.

Will knew it wasn't that funny. They always had to try and fix stuff before they got something new, and sometimes even then his mom would hold onto it just in case. That was how it went in their house. Things had to be mended until they couldn't be, and forget new... lightly used was the best they could hope for most times.

“Anyway, it turns out we still had these. And I know it's probably not the way you want to remember them, but since you don't have anything else, maybe they'll help,” Jonathan said, taking the awful Christmas card photos out and handing them to her.

Veronica took them, her eyes filling with tears as she looked at them, tracing her fingers over her parents' faces. “I hated those ugly sweaters. I... I never wanted to take the pictures... Mom used to say she'd buy me something extra special if I did... They had to take ten of this one because I kept flipping off the camera... she was so pissed...”

Will looked over at it. “Your hands aren't even in this picture.”

“Strategic cropping,” Jonathan said. “They couldn't get her to stop, so they just focused it in a way where her hands couldn't be seen.”

Veronica nodded. "The photographer told them he could fix it, and he did. They hired him again every year after that until she finally decided it wasn't worth the fight."

"I may have had something to do with that," his mom admitted. "I was... not so kind with your mom one year after her letter about the remodeling and how horrible their year was because of it."

"It wasn't you," Veronica said. "It was me deciding to flash the photographer."

"What?" Will asked. He knew about flashing. His friends had joked about it a few times, and they'd even said they were going to include a flasher in one of their campaigns. He turned out to be a troll that took off his armor, and Lucas said Mike was a chicken for not doing the real thing, but Mike liked to change things up and make them think they knew what he was doing when they didn't.

Only Will was sure they'd be up against the demogorgon this weekend. Somehow he just knew it.

"You didn't," his mom said, looking like she was torn between admiration and the horror of being a mom and what it would have been like for her daughter to do it.

Veronica shrugged. "Well, technically, I didn't. I'd gotten one of those crappy costumes for Halloween with the fake top, so it looked like I had coconuts on but it was a t-shirt. Still, that was more than enough for Mom. She couldn't be sure I wouldn't do it for real the next time. Betty said I was crazy, and her parents would have threatened to keep us from hanging out if they'd known but my mom didn't want anyone knowing. Appearances."

She looked down at the photos again. "God, those things were hideous. And I hated her for them every year, but... I miss them."

"Of course you do," his mom said. "I miss her, too, despite everything. I think I miss who she used to be more than anything. Back before it all went so wrong."

Will frowned. Jonathan put his hand on his shoulder.

“She means when Grandma and Grandpa died.”

“Oh.”

“Thank you for finding these,” Veronica told Jonathan, wiping at her cheek. “I... Thank you.”

“Least I could do,” he said. “You know, since I didn't... couldn't stop it.”

Veronica went white and ran from the room, and Will heard his bedroom door slam shut. Jonathan flinched like she'd hit him with it.

His mom shook her head, coming over to them. “That was a wonderful, sweet and kind thing you did, Jonathan. I am so proud of you and so glad you're as thoughtful as you are, but sweetheart, this wasn't your fault. You didn't—you can't blame yourself for what he did.”

He didn't seem very convinced, but his mom pulled them both into her arms and held onto them.

“We're going to be okay. Somehow, we'll get through this, all of us, and we'll be okay. I promise,” she said. “Why don't you two... wash up and set the table, and I'll check on Veronica?”

“Okay, Mom.”

“Veronica?”

“I lied.”

Joyce frowned, stepping inside the room and shutting the door behind her. “What?”

“Not about the photos. I hated the photos. And I did ruin them whenever I could. I cut up the sweaters one year, burned them another. I made faces and flipped off the camera and no matter what she promised me, I always acted up when it was time to take them,” Veronica said, wiping at her cheek again. “It's so stupid that this is all I have left of them.”

Joyce sighed. "I wish that we'd been on better terms. If we had, I'd have more to share with you. She sent a few of your school photos in the beginning, but we really did lose touch after she left. And I... I kind of hated her."

"That's what I lied about," Veronica said, looking back at her. "It was you fighting about that letter that made her stop sending stuff. She was angry about it. I told her you were right. The bathroom tile wasn't a crisis. The one she wanted was hideous anyway. I'm glad that burned in the fire."

Joyce went over to her, sitting down next to her. "You didn't have to make up some story—"

"I did fake flash the photographer," Veronica said. She looked at her hands. "She said sometimes it seemed like someone had... switched us. Me and Jonathan. I was too much like you. Looked like you, rebelled like you did..."

"You seemed like such a quiet kid. Smart. Better than my sister deserved."

Veronica shook her head. "Not really. I'm not... It was my fault. The fire. It... They're dead... it was my... fault... so stupid..."

Joyce sighed and pulled her niece against her. "It was not your fault. You couldn't have known. And you shouldn't blame yourself for that. Or for what Lonnie did."

"I'd ask you why you ever married him, but everyone knows, right?"

Joyce grimaced. "Veronica—"

"I'm not good. I'm not kind. Everyone thinks I'm crazy, and I am, but I wasn't... I'm not this little good girl innocent everyone thinks I was besides being nuts. I was doing stuff... the night before they died I was drinking at a frat party... this guy expected me to have sex with him. I didn't... he was a pig, but I did stuff with the Heathers... I'm not good. I sometimes think they're right and I did do it... I burned the house myself... like they said."

"I don't believe that."

"You don't know me," Veronica said, pulling away from her. "And yes, I do smoke. I think I smoke more than you do. And I had no choice but to steal your cigarettes because I can't buy my own anymore and I sit at school and wish someone would set Carol and Nicole on fire and those girls that came over to be nice to me... I know they're not... if they knew what I was really like, they wouldn't bother. No one would."

Joyce winced to think of Veronica sitting here all this time, believing that. She rose and touched the girl's arm. "You are not alone. I know that you got a shitty deal—and don't just mean the fire—your mom wasn't the greatest sister, but she was decent to you. Me? I work all the time. I barely see the boys. Jonathan's exhausted doing too much to try and help me, and Will... Well, there's so much I can't be here to do for him. Still, you are not alone in this. You came here, to me, and I want to believe it was for a reason, not just because I'm all you've got left but because we can all help each other. I know you should never have had to deal with Lonnie, and I can't tell you enough how sorry I am that fell on you. He was my mistake, my biggest mistake, and no one else should have had to pay for it, but the boys do and now you have."

"He thought I was you. It wasn't... he didn't... It wasn't like... that."

Joyce shook her head. That didn't make it better. "I just kept leaving him be, thinking if he got what he wanted and was free of us, that was the end of things. Easier to have him gone and out of our lives. He couldn't waste our money. Couldn't get drunk and have the whole town talking about what woman he'd been with... The boys didn't have to hear us screaming at each other. He was gone, and it was fine."

Veronica folded her arms over her chest. "He thought he could do whatever he wanted to me because I was you. Did you ever press charges on him? Ever?"

"I tried to," Joyce admitted. She hadn't told many people about that. "I... the chief before Hop thought I'd fall apart as a witness and even though everyone knew what Lonnie was like, he was still... my husband."

Veronica shook her head. "I hate this place. That's bullshit."

"Hop is different. He'll make sure the charges stick, though... it won't be easy. It's going to get worse. The rumors and everything... I know how it is, how bad it will get."

"I want him to pay," Veronica said. "His car exploding wasn't enough. He should have been in it."

Joyce agreed with that, though she had to worry about this morbid streak she saw in her niece. Damn it. Tomorrow was Saturday. She had to do something about that lawyer, about getting Veronica into therapy.

This couldn't go on.

Hop took a drink, turning his glass over in his hands. Normally he'd have a can of beer, but not this time. He needed something a hell of a lot stronger after what he'd just seen. He knew it shouldn't get to him like this, but it had. He'd almost like to blame it on losing his daughter, not that he wanted to use Sara or even think about her death, but he also didn't want to delve too deeply into how badly it unsettled him to see bruises on Veronica.

It was because she was a teenager. Too young for this. Young like Joyce had been when she lost her parents, when Marion had left with her husband and left her behind with a sick mom and barely functioning father.

Hop knew the lines were blurring. They always did when it came to Joyce, and there were reasons why staying away was the best if not only option where that was concerned.

Still, those pictures made him want to go back to the station, yank Lonnie Byers out of his cell and pound the shit out of him, and Hop knew he'd done worse to Joyce. She always denied it, but there was no way this asshole did that to her niece thinking it was her without having gone a lot further in the past with her.

Lonnie was not walking free this time. Hop was making sure he

served time for this. He knew it would be rough for all of them, but in the end, seeing that man behind bars would be good for all of them, not just Veronica or Joyce, but even Jonathan and Will.

It wasn't hard to figure out that Will had made the call. He'd been scared, and if he'd felt he needed to call the police, he needed reassurance just as much as the rest of them. Jonathan hadn't been able to stop his father, so he'd feel better if the man was at least behind bars, though knowing his mom, Jonathan was blaming himself.

Christ, there was too much there that needed fixing, and Hop didn't want to be seeing it. He wanted to go back to pills and booze and should have found some other woman to distract him tonight.

His eyes went to the photographs again, and he frowned. God, they'd think he was a pervert, looking at them over again, but it wasn't that. He'd even thought it was just the resemblance to Joyce that was bothering him, but that one. There.

He picked up the one the doctor had taken of Veronica's arm, close up on the bruise from Lonnie grabbing hold of her, and frowned. The dark mark still pissed him off, but that burn scar. Something about it was off.

He turned it and felt the whiskey churn in his stomach. He'd seen marks like that before. In 'Nam. Not napalm, no, but still from that darkness. Things went all to hell over there, and he couldn't say his side was always the most right—in fact, one of them was downright wrong. Hop was glad that bastard had died over there. He'd never forget how sick he'd been when he walked back into camp and seen the VietCong the other man had tortured. He looked like hell after that psycho was done, and Hop still didn't know how that man had lived through it.

He also doubted the man had anything useful to tell.

He didn't have pictures of that, but he swore these ones had been made the same way. Someone had held something against her skin until it burned deep enough to leave a scar. Not once. Not twice. Three times on her arms alone, once on her back. That was all he'd

seen from the pictures, but he wouldn't be surprised if there were more on her.

What the fuck? Who would do that to a teenage girl? Were those parents of hers real monsters? Was that it? Had she actually killed them in that fire? If they'd done that to her, he couldn't blame her.

If they hadn't... could she have done it to herself? To cover up the fire?

Was Joyce's niece that coldblooded a killer?

He couldn't believe that. She was too much like Joyce for that.

Or maybe that was all an act, like her being traumatized after the fire.

He leaned back, cursing his suspicious mind. He didn't want to think like that. Not about some teenage girl, not about Joyce's niece—her fucking spitting image—but he couldn't ignore what he'd seen in those pictures. Something didn't add up. Someone was lying about that night.

He was going to have to find out who.

9. Chapter 9

Summary for the Chapter:

Joyce takes care of Veronica in the hospital. Hop steps in it. The shopping trip is a bit of a disaster.

Notes for the Chapter:

I apologize if I got... at all weird while I was at the worst of my migraine. It does tend to make me... odd. And yesterday was a really bad day as well, so I suppose it's better I didn't get to updates as I say too much in author's notes sometimes.

This was a part I had planned for a bit, but it kept not working out, and even now, it's not really what I thought it would be. The shopping trip took a couple turns on me as I tried to get it to where I had intended to end it.

Oh, and apparently, I mistook the actress' last name for the character in Brenner's agent, but I don't know that they ever used her real one on the show.

September 30

One of the worst drives in her life behind her, Joyce stood at the foot of a hospital bed and stared at herself. Oh, she knew it wasn't herself in the bed. She did. She hadn't been in any fires, and she was fine, anxiety issues and deadbeat ex-husband aside. Still, it wasn't easy, looking at Veronica and seeing what could easily have been her a couple decades ago.

She couldn't tear her eyes away.

“All right, honey, I've got your medicine and—oh, my God.”

Joyce turned over to look at the nurse. Her name tag said Helen, and she had her hand on her chest like Joyce had just given her a heart attack.

“I'm sorry. I just... for a second there, I thought she'd gotten up and out of bed and—forgive me. That resemblance is just uncanny. Are you her mother?”

Joyce shook her head. It wouldn't be the first time it was suggested, not with the resemblance that was only stronger now than it had been when Veronica was younger. Some unkind whispers said she'd given her baby away to the sister she barely spoke to, which was ridiculous because she never would have given up one of her own, no matter how hard things were or what Lonnie said.

“Her aunt,” she corrected. “Her parents are dead.”

It felt strange to say that. Her sister was gone, and Joyce was still a little numb about the whole thing. She had a complicated relationship with Marion, and it had never gotten easier or better, not with her sister's tendency to brag. Maybe Marion didn't know what she was doing, but she was, all the time. Her good life with her husband, her big, expensive house, her fucking croquet set in her backyard.

“Oh. I see. I'm sorry,” Helen said. She gave her a smile, too, before moving toward the bed.

Veronica hadn't stirred when Joyce came in, so she'd assumed she was asleep, but as soon as Helen got near the bed, Veronica screamed and jerked away, falling off the other side onto the floor.

Joyce ran over and knelt next to her. “Veronica, Veronica, look at me. It's your aunt Joyce. Do you remember me? Do you know who I am?”

Veronica stared at her. “J... Joyce?”

“That's me. I know we never met much before, sweetheart. Your mom didn't like coming back to Hawkins and I couldn't really leave, but I'm here now,” Joyce said, feeling so inadequate. The poor girl was

terrified, and she couldn't help, couldn't think of the right thing to say.

Apparently, that didn't matter. Veronica threw herself at Joyce, grabbing hold of her and shaking as she clung to her.

"Don't let them give me more drugs," Veronica whispered. "Please. No more."

"Okay," Joyce said, though she would have thought that the pain would make her want them. "Can you stand up for me? We need to get you back in bed."

"Want to go."

"Your house burned down, sweetheart. We can't go there."

"Please... don't want to stay here..."

"We'll see what your doctor says, okay? Back into bed first. You shouldn't be on the floor." Joyce eased herself out of Veronica's hold and rose, helping the girl to her feet and getting her to climb up onto the bed again. She looked over at the nurse. "Would you find her doctor for me? I'd like to speak to him."

"I should give her—"

"That can wait until the doctor's seen her, I'm sure," Joyce said. She was not going to have her niece drugged while she was here. Veronica didn't want it, and she didn't think it was necessary. The girl needed rest, sure, but drugs? No. What Veronica needed most of all right now was to know that she wasn't alone. Forcing her to sleep wouldn't help that.

"Of course," the nurse said with a thin smile, and she left the room. Joyce shook her head, turning back to Veronica.

"I am so sorry you were alone for this," Joyce told her, taking her hand. "I wish I could have been her sooner, but I didn't get the call until yesterday, and then I had to get Donald to give me time off work and make sure the boys would be okay while I was gone—Jonathan I'm sure would be fine, but I wasn't sure about Will—not

that his brother can't look after him, but he ended up at the Wheeler's anyway and... I'm sorry. That probably isn't what you want to hear at all."

Veronica curled up into a ball. "He's dead."

Joyce winced. "I know. It's... it takes time... but it... I still miss my mom. I miss who my dad was before she got sick... It's... Damn it, I'm making a mess of this, but I'm here, okay? I'm not leaving you. I'm going to bring you home with me. It won't be what you're used to, what you'd want, I don't think. The boys aren't the cleanest, and I'm not much better. Still, you... you can have Will's room and he'll share with Jonathan and we'll... we'll make it work, I promise."

Veronica closed her eyes, and Joyce stood by her, combing her fingers through the girl's hair and trying to believe her words weren't a lie.

"Mrs. Byers?"

Joyce grimaced, wishing she'd never taken that name. She didn't regret the boys, but she did regret Lonnie in plenty of ways, and right now she was feeling it a bit more, even if it was only because she was waiting for her sister's lawyer, of all things. Her sister had a lawyer. She had a will. She had things to leave behind to her daughter.

Her sons would be lucky if they could sell that house to cover half of the debts Lonnie had racked up and she was still paying for.

"Thank you for coming to see me here," Joyce said, forcing a smile and looking back at Veronica's bed. She had not reacted well to her doctor saying she wasn't ready to leave, screaming and shrieking so badly they'd sedated her. Joyce wanted a second opinion there, but it would have to wait.

"Not a problem," the lawyer assured her. "I understand these are difficult circumstances. I think it's very admirable you'd rather remain here, and it only shows how my client's trust in you was well-founded."

Joyce snorted. "My sister and I did not get along, Mr. Humphry."

"Nevertheless, she entrusted her only child's care to you. Veronica has a college fund and her parents each had a life insurance policy for a hundred thousand dollars. She is their sole heir, and that money is to be placed in trust until she's eighteen. Until then, this should see to her basic needs and any incidentals until she's of age."

Joyce nodded, feeling a bit shaken. Veronica had more money now than Joyce had probably seen in her whole life. She knew her house wasn't worth that much, and her car was a piece of junk and... damn. Her niece was rich.

"The house was also insured, and there will be a payout from that once the investigation is officially closed."

"Investigation?"

"They want to be sure it wasn't arson," the lawyer said. "Another house went down the night before, and it must have been a gas main, possibly weakened by the first fire to lead to the one at your sister's home. Or so I've been told."

Joyce nodded. She thought the policeman had said something similar to her on the phone, but she barely remembered most of those conversations. Everything after Hop came to see her at the house and told her Marion was dead was a bit of a blur and she couldn't do much but focus on getting to Veronica.

"How long will it take to get this trust in place?" Joyce asked. "I—she doesn't have any clothes, anything personal. We can move her into my son's room for now, but I'll need a bigger place and probably have to rent it which is—and the medical bills. I have no idea how they'll get paid without that."

"She's covered under her parents' insurance for now. That will cover the expenses here, and I'll get that trust in place as soon as possible to see to the rest."

"Okay," Joyce said. That sounded good. Fine, even. They could manage for a bit until the money came in. She and Veronica were

about the same size, so if worst came to worst, she could wear Joyce's clothes for a bit. They'd go shopping for new stuff as soon as they could.

"Here's my card," Humphry said, handing it to her. "If you have any questions, call me."

She nodded. "Thank you."

He gave her a smile and left. She leaned against the foot of Veronica's bed and tried to smile again. "I know you didn't hear that, but it's not all bad news. That trust should help, and you can do college... It'll get better than this. It has to."

Veronica didn't stir. Joyce sighed and decided to find her doctor. It was probably better for all of them if she took Veronica home sooner rather than later.

"Mr. Humphry."

He turned from his car door, and Connie Dyer put on one of her best smiles for him. The nurse uniform did her no favors, but she had decided to supervise the girl's stay in the hospital herself, since every other step of this that had been entrusted to others had been a spectacular failure. She had enough resources at her disposal to have the necessary credentials ready within a moment's notice, and she was familiar enough with medicine to fake the basics. Years with Brenner in that lab certainly hadn't hurt in that respect.

She still wished the man didn't always think that he knew better than anyone. If he had listened to her when Nine's power first spiked, they would not be in this mess now. He was dangerous and had never been easy to control, and Brenner overestimated his influence as the children's "Papa."

Nine's willingness to please didn't come close to his growing resentment of the pain and the impossible demands being made of him. He was not Eleven, not Eight, not any of the others, and he could not do what they did. He could and did summon fire at will, and that alone should have warned Brenner off, but the man believed

he could control them all.

Heaven help them if they lost control of Eleven.

And if this trap didn't catch Nine, and that damned boy was still alive, she knew their entire project would burn to the ground.

"I need to speak to you about Veronica Sawyer's trust."

He frowned. "You're her nurse, aren't you?"

"I am one of them," she said, "and you, as her lawyer, need to take an immediate vacation for your health."

"Excuse me?"

The other members of her team came up behind him, one of them injecting him with a sedative.

She looked him over. "Take him somewhere he won't be found."

They obeyed without a word, loading him into his car. One got behind the wheel and drove it out of the lot. The other returned to their vehicle, following the first car. She watched them go, still displeased with the way this operation was going.

The lawyer would be simple to deal with, that wasn't the problem. They'd arrange for someone to take over his business soon enough, but she knew that Joyce Byers and that girl could not be allowed to get their hands on any of that money. It could mean them leaving Hawkins, and until they could confirm that Nine was dead—and Connie hadn't gone to all of this trouble if she thought he was—the Byers family had to stay put.

Especially since she knew that woman was fixing to pull the girl out of the hospital within the next few hours.

They should have had more time with her, made certain she wouldn't talk and that if she did, she'd be taken for completely crazy, but that damned policeman had called up to Hawkins too soon, forcing them to accelerate their plans.

They'd have to watch the Sawyer girl carefully in the days to come, see if she showed any signs of talking. Or if Nine attempted to contact her.

Connie felt sure he would. Brenner's way of controlling the children involved starving them for affection, and the girl had been foolish enough to give Nine plenty. He'd return for her if he could.

And when he did, she would personally end his threat, just as she should have years ago.

November 5

"Oh, Hop. I was just on my way out the door," Joyce said, pulling on her vest as she walked toward her car. She stopped at the door, turning to look at him in a panic. "What's wrong? Is it Lonnie? Did he get out somehow or—"

"He's in lock up for the whole weekend," Hop said. "Can't get arraigned until Monday, so he's not going anywhere."

She put a hand on her chest, looking like she was fighting panic. "Oh, good. I thought—you almost scared me to death. Why are you here?"

"Had some more questions for Veronica."

"More questions? I thought she was pretty clear about everything that happened," Joyce said. Then she grimaced. "Well, as clear as she could be. She did say she kind of lost where she was when Lonnie grabbed her, so she wasn't all there, but she told you everything. You do believe that, don't you? You don't actually think she—that it was worse than what she said or something? Did Lonnie say something that made you think—"

"He didn't say anything," Hop said, wishing he'd been able to time this better. He didn't know how to explain to Joyce that he thought something was off about the fire that had killed her sister, that her niece was lying about it and might even have had something to do with it.

“Then why do you have more questions?”

He should have come up with an excuse before coming out. If he'd been thinking when he woke up and wasn't so damned hungover, he would have. “I was putting the pictures in the report and I noticed something about an older scar. I wanted to ask her about it.”

“Why?”

“Damn it, do you have to question everything I do?” Hop folded his arms over his chest. “Okay, fine. I admit it. It's not about a scar. It's... I was going to give her some money to spend at the mall today.”

“Hop—”

“I know how you feel about charity, and you hate the idea, but Joyce, she can't go on wearing your clothes all the time. Hell, it's starting to weird me out, seeing her like that. She's... too much like you, and with what we were back when you were her age—I would just like to see her less like a copy of you and more of her own person. Plus, she deserves it after the shit she's been through. I know you'd do it if you could, and what the hell fun is it shopping without any money?”

“It's sweet of you, Hop, aside from the whole charity thing, but... Veronica's not here. She and the other girls left already.”

“What?”

“I have a feeling they're actually headed for Indianapolis, but I am trying really hard not to freak out about that and be the aunt that doesn't freak out like a nutcase the moment a kid is out of sight and let her have some freedom because she could use it and she's not a baby and I still don't know what to think of the fact that she smokes and stole my cigarettes, but I'm saving that one for later because I feel like I failed her in so many ways and letting Lonnie get near her—and she said she started before she came here so it's not like she picked it up from me, just exploited my habit and—why are you looking at me like that?”

“Like what?” Hop asked. He didn't know he was giving her any kind

of look. He had to figure it was a goofy looking one, with his confused and changing reactions to her words. He didn't like the idea of Veronica in Indianapolis, but he couldn't do much to stop it now. He also didn't like Joyce calling herself a nutcase because she wasn't crazy. He had confirmation now that Veronica smoked, but what the hell did he do with that? It was still disturbing as hell to compare the two of them, and it was now worse because she had the same addiction as her aunt.

"That."

"I swear, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Sure you don't," she said, rolling her eyes. "Look, I have to work. I am going to go in there, man my register, and try not to worry about my niece. In a few minutes, no one will be home. Will's going to the Wheeler's, some big campaign Mike's been working on all week for them and Karen said they could all stay the night, which is fine. Jonathan's got a shift of his own tonight, so... shit. The dog. No one will be home to feed the dog."

"You want me to swing by later?"

She shook her head. "No. I told Veronica to call me as soon as they were back, so I'll just ask her to feed him when she's home. He should be fine."

"If you're sure."

"I'm sure. Now I need to go. I'm going to be so late, and Donald is already unhappy with me because I keep having to leave early."

Hop shook his head. "None of that was your fault. You were where you were supposed to be. Veronica needed you. The boys needed you. One of us should have kicked Lonnie's ass, but that's not the same thing."

She laughed. "Yeah, well, seeing those bruises on her, I wish I had."

Hop eyed her. "That the first time you saw any of her burns?"

"No, I saw them back at the hospital. Why?"

He shook his head. “No reason.”

“You’d never seen them before,” Joyce said. “It... she looks like she came out of it without any damage, but it’s not true. She just... covers it up with my sweaters and hides in Will’s room so no one can tell how much she’s hurting.”

“You think that’s a pattern?”

Joyce frowned. “What do you mean? You—you asshole. You *were* lying about the questions. You think something’s wrong with the scars. You... Tell me you do not think that my sister and her husband abused her. God, Hop, what is *wrong* with you? Marion was a bit of a bitch, I won’t lie, and she abandoned me when I needed her most, but she was not capable of that. Not to her daughter. Not even if she looked so much like me and apparently raised as much hell as I did.”

“I didn’t—”

“I’m going to work. You stay away from my niece, or I swear, I will give you the beating I did not give Lonnie,” Joyce said, opening her car door and getting in. She slammed it shut and started up the engine, pulling out faster than anyone should in this driveway.

Fuck. That had not gone anywhere close to as planned.

“She was pretty broken up when I gave her the pictures I found,” Jonathan said, and the chief looked back at him in surprise. He knew neither of them had realized he was there on the porch, and he’d almost said something, but then his mom got really mad and took off, so it was too late.

“What?”

“I found the old Christmas cards my aunt sent us, and I gave them to her yesterday. She told us about how she used to sabotage the ugly sweater photo shoot every year—was kind of funny, I wish we’d seen it because she said she did all sorts of stuff from flipping off the photographer to fake flashing him. She also cried and hid in her room afterward,” Jonathan said. “I don’t think her parents were abusive.

She really seems to miss them.”

The chief nodded. “You’re probably right. I just... saw something and wanted to clarify it, that’s all. Your mom overreacted.”

“Yeah.” Jonathan had seen that for himself. He thought his mom was a little too close to it. Given what her sister had done, leaving her with his grandparents when the one was sick and the other wasn’t coping with her dying, that wasn’t right, and someone who could do that might be capable of worse because it wasn’t like she’d been kind there. And since most of the time they seemed to fight when they did interact, was it that far-fetched to think his aunt could have taken out her anger on his cousin, who looked exactly like his mom?

“It bothers you now that you’ve heard me say it.”

“I guess... I wouldn’t want to believe that she would or that Veronica would miss them if they had been like that, but... she looks so much like my mom, you know? If my aunt really hated my mom, she could have done something terrible to her lookalike.”

“Have to admit, the thought crossed my mind, too,” the chief said, putting a cigarette in his mouth and lighting it up. “It’s weird as hell how much she looks like your mom did.”

“I know.”

“Since I’m here,” the chief began. “Might as well get your statement. The formal one. Your dad’ll be arraigned on Monday, so he can’t bother anyone over the weekend, but they could release him on bail then if they’re stupid.”

“They have been before.”

“Not this time,” Hopper told him. “No. I’ve got your cousin’s statement and your mom’s, and I’ve got a doctor’s and the photographs they took of the bruises on Veronica. He’s not going anywhere except to prison.”

Jonathan hoped so, but there was still a chance someone would let him go again. “The guy before you, he let him out.”

"That was different, and I already told you, kid. I'm not letting him go. I think he should have been locked up a long time ago."

Jonathan looked at him. "You've never liked my dad, have you?"

"Lonnie was a dick back in high school. He never got any better," Hopper said. "None of that's worth dwelling on now. You have to work, I need your statement, so let's get this done."

Jonathan nodded. Whatever it took to keep his dad behind bars, he'd do it. He didn't want Lonnie out to hurt any of them again. He'd hoped, like his mom had, that when his dad took off the last time it was the end of it, but it never was. He still managed to hurt Will by not showing up, and while Jonathan did what he could, having already given up on Lonnie years ago, it never really took the sting out of it when Will believed in him.

"Do I need to write this down or...?"

"Yeah. We'll need it written and signed. And you'll have to be ready to testify."

That turned Jonathan's stomach. "I kind of failed speech."

"All you need to do is tell them the truth," Hopper said. "You tell it exactly as it happened. The defense might try and rattle you, but even the scum I figure your father would get if he doesn't end up with a public defender would look like an asshole badgering you or Veronica. If they've got any sense, they'll tell him to plead it out."

Jonathan snorted. "He'd have to admit he did something wrong then, and he won't."

"Maybe, maybe not. We don't know what he'll think when he finds out what he's up against."

Jonathan doubted it. Lonnie was too much of a jerk to make this easy on anyone. He'd draw it out and make a nuisance of himself.

"I could ask her," Jonathan said, and Hopper frowned at him. "Veronica. I could ask her about her parents, if they hurt her."

“You siding with me over your mother?”

“No. Just... Veronica kind of talked to me the other day, and if it did happen... maybe it's better to know, even if Mom doesn't think it's possible.”

“Don't push or anything. Your cousin's been through enough.”

“Wow,” Barb said. “You look amazing.”

Veronica turned back to look at the mirror, twisting her lip. Heather Chandler wouldn't have approved, but then it was all black and not the slightest bit blue like she was supposed to wear. She twisted, trying to get a better sense of the dress. It had been too long since she'd had anything with a skirt—her aunt did not wear them, from what she could tell—and she kind of missed them. She hadn't thought she would, but she did.

She smoothed down the skirt. “I don't even know why I tried it on.”

“It's not fun if Nancy's the only one trying on stuff,” Barb told her. She looked over at the other doors. “She's back out there looking at shirts again, isn't she?”

Veronica shrugged. She wasn't sure, but she wouldn't be surprised. Nancy was on a quest, and nothing seemed to be good enough. She didn't understand it, but then she almost felt like those days of obsessing over gloss and trying to meet Heather's standards belonged to someone else, some other Veronica that wasn't her.

“I think she tried on a few that would have looked good on you,” Barb said. “You have more of a figure than she does.”

“So do you,” Veronica said. The Heathers would have been less kind about it. “You haven't tried anything on.”

Barb shook her head. “I don't need anything new, and this stuff isn't really... me.”

Veronica eyed her dress again. “This is a little fancy. We should try a different store. She should try a new store. Any top she gets from

here will seem like she's trying too hard. Which she is, and it's stupid because once he gets in her pants, it'll be done. Or she can be like Heather and give him blow jobs at lame ass parties."

"Nancy's not like that."

Veronica looked at the mirror again. She'd thought she wasn't, but she sold out to join the Heathers. She'd turned herself into someone she wasn't, someone who cared only about fashion and staying popular even as it destroyed her.

The fire had just finished what she started.

"Veronica? You okay?"

She had a sudden need to get out of this dress and far away from here. She reached for the zipper, trying to pull it down, choking as she did, finding it hard to get air in her lungs. She couldn't breathe in this thing.

"Get... it... off..."

"Hey, it's okay," Barb said. "I'll help. Just calm down. Take a breath. And another."

Veronica did, trembling. Barb undid the zipper, and Veronica fled back into the stall, slamming the door shut behind her. She tore the dress off and reached for the clothes she'd worn in, and then she curled up on the floor, shaking. She didn't want to put them back on.

"Veronica?"

"I... I need a minute."

"Are you sure you don't need—"

"No."

She tried to calm herself and make herself put the shirt on, but she couldn't. She just sat there, shuddering, wishing she could stop it and make it so she was normal again, so that she wasn't such a freak. What was wrong with her?

“Veronica?” Nancy this time. Damn it. “I thought maybe you might want to try this. I'm not sure what it is about it but it made me think of you.”

She held two hangers over the door, and Veronica looked up, frowning. She swallowed, forcing herself up and over to the door. “This is... not me at all.”

“It was an excuse to get you to open the door,” Nancy admitted. “Will you let us in?”

“I... I just need to get dressed and out of here, okay? I... Give me a few minutes.” She pulled on the shirt and the pants and then her shoes. She didn't look at the mirror again, not wanting to see herself as she was.

She stepped out, finding them waiting for her. “I think I'm done shopping.”

“That's fine. Why don't we get something for lunch?” Nancy suggested. “Do you like Orange Julius?”

Fruit smoothies. Slushies. Veronica tried to fight it, but she burst into tears and went back into the stall, locking the door behind her and curling up on the floor.

Nancy looked at Barb, who winced, shaking her head. She hadn't meant to set Veronica off again. She'd just thought it might be a good time to break for lunch, and food would distract them all from what had just happened, only it somehow made it worse.

“Veronica?”

Nancy wondered if they should just leave now. She hadn't found her perfect shirt yet, and she doubted Veronica would want the dress Barb had said she looked great in since it set off a panic. No, Veronica hadn't found anything yet that they could buy for her, and Nancy still wanted her to get something.

The door opened back up again, and Veronica stepped out, wiping her cheeks. “Sorry. Just... touchy today, I guess.”

“Are you hungry? Or should we—”

“Food’s fine,” Veronica said, digging in her pocket and taking out her cigarettes. She started for the outer door, and Nancy figured they might have to do a bit of shopping on their own if that was Veronica’s plan.

She followed after the other girl, glad she hadn’t actually found anything to buy here. Veronica lit up as soon as she was out of the store, blowing smoke at the mom who frowned at her. Nancy grimaced, though she knew this was in some ways the other girl’s way of coping. She was being rude on purpose, trying to hide her embarrassment over her breakdown back there.

Barb caught up to Veronica. “Food court’s the other way, you know.”

“I... Oh. I was turned around,” Veronica said, but her eyes were on the mannequin in the store window. “I used to have a shirt like that.”

Nancy looked at it. They hadn’t gone in to this store because it was like twice the cost of the others, but then everyone did say that Veronica’s mom had run off with a rich man. She probably could have afforded it. “You want to try that one on?”

“That is such a bad idea.”

“Oh, come on,” Barb said. “Even Nancy doesn’t usually shop in this store. It’ll be a rare treat for all of us. And... I’ll even try something on if you want me to.”

Veronica shrugged. She put the cigarette out and pulled on the door, opening it. She went to the rack with the same shirts as the models, taking one off and then another, different one from the rack by it. She found something everywhere she passed, and Nancy had to admit, all of it looked good and like it would probably fit her.

“I so should have kept my mouth shut,” Barb said. “I’ll look ridiculous in any of this.”

Nancy shrugged. “At least she seems... happy again. This is so her. She probably shopped in this store all the time back home.”

"Nancy, Barb," Veronica said, waving them over. "Here. I have the perfect thing for you, Nancy. This one I think only you could pull off. It's got this lined pattern that would just look wrong on someone else—God, that sounds rude, talk about a backwards compliment, Heather was good at those—oh, and this. I think this would look nice on you, Barb. It's classic."

Nancy held up the top Veronica had suggested. Okay, she wasn't wrong, and it was kind of insulting, but anyone with real curves would never pull off this one, since its odd striped pattern would stretch in weird, awful ways, but it might not be so bad on her since she was board flat and all.

"I like it," she said, since the colors were nice together and it was the kind of shirt that was well made and on the slightly fancy side but also not so fancy she'd looked like she was dressing up and trying to impress Steve, which she wasn't. "And Barb... that shirt does look nice. It would go well with your curls and everything."

Which was her nice way of saying it wouldn't clash with Barb's hair, but it was still true. Barb had a nice look, with her own bit of style, and this fit right in with it.

"I used to want to work in this store," Veronica said, shaking her head as she went over to another rack. "My mom wouldn't let me, just figured an allowance was enough, that it was too late coming back at night and I'd ruin my schoolwork."

"I thought you said you went to parties all the time," Barb said, taking her eyes off the blouse for a second. "Didn't that affect your schoolwork?"

"Genius," Veronica reminded them with a bitter laugh. "Besides, in my parents' eyes, the Heathers could do no wrong."

"Why do you always call them the Heathers?"

"Oh. That. Um... sorry, not used to people who don't know," Veronica said. "There were three of them—Heather Chandler, Heather Duke, and Heather McNamara. They floated above it all. Chandler was the leader, queen of the school. Duke was quiet, usually had her nose in a

book. McNamara was a cheerleader. The other two didn't really think for themselves.”

“So... all you had to do was have the name Heather and you were popular?”

Veronica shrugged. “They were also beautiful and color-coded, but who knows? I'm going to go try these on.”

Nancy blinked a few times, turning to Barb. “I swear, I don't think I'm ever going to understand her. One minute she's... and the next...”

Barb shrugged. “She's trying. And it sounds like her life before was a whole other world. It's got to be weird coming to this.”

Nancy nodded. She lifted up the top. “I think I do have to try this. And you're coming with and we have to see how that looks on you.”

“Nancy—”

“I bet it looks great. Veronica might have a bit of an eye for this.”

“You really didn't—shouldn't have done that,” Veronica said, looking down at the bag Nancy had just handed her. She'd put everything she tried on back on the rack even though it looked perfect on her, enough to make Barb envy her a little, if only in her figure, though the bit of scars she could see under the edge of the sleeves would make anyone feel like a heel for being jealous.

Then again, Barb knew she was kind of heavy, and it wasn't like Carol or Nicole ever let her forget that. Nancy never noticed, but they were complete opposites, her thin and Barb so very not.

“We wanted to,” Nancy insisted. “And frankly, I owe you because that was the top, and it would have taken us the whole weekend to find it if you hadn't come. I never would have gone in there, and definitely wouldn't have thought that was the one, but it so was.”

Barb had to agree it looked great on Nancy, and it was a relief to know they wouldn't be spending the entire weekend hunting down the perfect top—which, aside from the one Nancy had bought, did

not exist.

“And you talked Barb into getting something,” Nancy went on, “which is perfect for her and I can never win that battle, so... yeah.”

Veronica didn't look convinced. “All of this was way too expensive to be thank yous for that.”

“Are you going to hate us forever if we hated the idea that all you had were your aunt's hand-me-downs?” Barb asked, grimacing. “Because... it felt wrong and we wanted to do something about it.”

Veronica swallowed. “I don't... I don't deserve this.”

“Yes, you do,” Nancy insisted. “Now let's hit the food court before we drive back.”

Veronica nodded numbly, and Barb moved up to stick her in the middle of them as they walked, hoping they hadn't overstepped anything. Maybe they should have waited to give her the clothes until they were back in Hawkins.

“I can't believe this, but I am so craving one of those disgusting hot dogs smothered in chili and cheese,” Nancy said. “Even onions. That is so what Mike would eat, with his mouth open the whole time. And yet I really want one. And a smoothie.”

Veronica tensed. “Um...”

“Veronica?”

She lifted up the bag. “Is it horrible if I change before we go back?”

Barb shook her head, though she suspected that wasn't the only thing on the other girl's mind. She'd freaked out about the Orange Julius thing earlier, and she was doing it again, for some reason. “No, go ahead. We can order you something if you like.”

“Um... anything but cherry,” Veronica said, rushing off down the hall toward the restrooms.

Nancy sighed. “Just when I think we're making progress.”

“Hey, she took the clothes a lot better than I thought she would,” Barb said. “It’s good. She’ll change and join us, and whatever her thing is with cherry smoothies, we can deal with that later.”

Nancy nodded. They joined the back of the long line, waiting in an awkward silence as they did. It wasn’t really right to talk about Veronica’s problems in a crowd this big, and Barb was feeling the weight of her own bag right now. She never bought stuff like this, and it was all she’d had to spend today, too. At least they had money from others to cover what Veronica had found.

“She didn’t mention any food.”

“I guess get her one of those hot dogs, too,” Barb said, since she had to have one now, too, thanks to Nancy. The idea of Mike eating one should have put anyone off it, but she was hungry and it was kind of a mall ritual.

They took their food back to the table, leaving Veronica’s food in front of an empty chair. Nancy set to work with a fork, making short work of her chili dog, and Barb tried not to eat hers too fast, knowing what people would think of the fat girl scarfing hers down.

She finished and reached for her smoothie.

“Veronica should have been back by now.”

“Maybe she had trouble deciding what to wear,” Barb said, but both of them rose and started toward the restrooms at the same time, running down the last part of the hall until they reached them. Nancy got inside first, eying the empty stalls and then focusing on the last one, the larger handicapped one.

Barb swallowed. Had they actually lost Veronica? Everyone would kill them. Chief Hopper would kill them.

Then she heard it. Something like a moan. Barb’s eyes caught the bag on the floor, the one from the shop they’d been in, and it had to be Veronica.

Nancy marched over and yanked on door, opening it even though it should have been locked. She stood there, gaping, and Barb didn’t

know how to react, either. Veronica was tangled up with some guy in a dark shirt. His back was to them, her arms around his neck, and he had her up against the wall but not so much Barb couldn't see that she wasn't wearing a shirt.

“Shit.”

“Veronica?”

10. Chapter 10

Summary for the Chapter:

The boys adjust to having their cousin in their home.

The mall trip continues to be a bit of a disaster.

Notes for the Chapter:

It was hard to get the tone of this chapter right. And part of my later plot ideas ended up kind of making a mess of this and forcing me to redo what I'd written.

October 1

“Wait, what?” Will demanded, staring at his mother in disbelief. “Why do I have to give up my room? No one said anything about giving up my room.”

Jonathan had expected it. He hadn't said anything about it to Will, who was a bit out of sorts from their mom having to leave the way she did. Maybe he didn't want to admit it, but he was worried about her. So was Jonathan. He would rather they'd all been able to go to Ohio, but he understood it was a lot less expensive for his mom to do it on her own. One meal to buy instead of three, only one bed at the motel, and since someone had to take care of the house and the dog, she went on her own, leaving them here. Jonathan had made sure Will was with his friends and picked up a couple shifts while she was gone. She wouldn't be happy if she knew.

She didn't have to know, and something had to offset the cost of her trip and her time off.

He should have talked to Will about moving their stuff in together, since he had a feeling that was what was going to happen when his mom brought their cousin home.

Veronica was a girl. She'd get her own room. Will and Jonathan had to share.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. When the money from her parents' insurance comes in, we'll get something bigger, I promise, and you'll all have your own space," his mom said, giving Will a sad smile and cupping his cheek. "You still have Castle Byers all to yourself when it's warm, and this is just temporary."

"How temporary?"

"At least until she's eighteen," Jonathan said, and his mom looked at him. "Well, it's true. You're her guardian until she's an adult. So, at least until then. We might move, but she's going to be with us."

"What?" Will demanded. "No. This is—it's our home. Why do we have to take in some stranger? No one asked us if it's what we wanted."

"She's family," their mom said. "And she's got no one else, and there is no way I am leaving someone as hurt and scared as she is alone. No one should be alone, and us? We're lucky. I have you two. I have the best boys in the world, but Veronica... her parents are gone. Her house is gone. She is all alone, and if we turn her away... I can't. I can't do it. And it's not just because she looks like me or it's the right thing to do... She needs us."

"And I need my room," Will said. "That's my stuff and my bed and—"

"And I'm not taking any of it away from you." Their mom looked out toward the car. "I... She was so upset in the hospital that I couldn't leave her there another day, but I should have made sure we had things ready for her first. Tomorrow we'll go get a bed from the Salvation Army for her to put in your room. We'll move your bed in with Jonathan's. We'll shift a few shelves around, a desk or two... we can do this, right? We can make this work, can't we?"

Jonathan wasn't thrilled about it, but he'd manage. He knew it would hit Will harder, almost everything did. "We can. I already boxed up some of my stuff I don't need to keep in the house and put it in the shed to make room."

"You knew?" Will asked, hurt. "You didn't say anything."

"I figured you'd be upset and you may as well enjoy the time you had left, plus it wasn't official yet," Jonathan said. "Could have been that some of Veronica's other relatives wanted her or something."

"She didn't have any that came forward, and Marion's lawyer said she named me as the one she wanted to take custody of Veronica should anything happen."

"I thought you two hated each other," Will said, frowning.

"We didn't—it was complicated. Look, I know this won't be easy, and I should have talked to you before I left about all of what this would mean if we did take her in, but she's here. She's in that car, and I'm not going to send her back. There's nowhere to send her. So just... please, work with me. Veronica's parents left her some money, and we will make improvements once we get it, okay?"

Will shook his head. "That doesn't make it better. I don't see why I should have to lose my space to her. Why can't she share with you? Or have the couch?"

"Will," Jonathan said. He was being a little selfish. The couch was a piece of shit, and they all knew it. No one wanted to sleep on that. And it wasn't really fair to make their mom share, especially with all of her late hours. "I'll be fine. We'll make some new mix tapes and stuff. It's not that bad."

"Yeah, right," Will muttered. He folded his arms over his chest, disgusted.

Their mom started to promise him something else, but then the front door opened, and Will jumped as it hit the wall. So did the girl that just walked in.

Holy hell. She looked almost exactly like their mom, aside from the head-to-toe black. The jacket was his mom's, Jonathan realized, and that just made it worse.

She looked around, eyes wide.

"Veronica." Their mom rushed over to her. "I'm so sorry you woke up in the car by yourself. I was just telling the boys about what we needed to do to get the house ready. Why don't you come and meet them? This is Jonathan, he's your age, and Will here is twelve."

The girl just stared at them.

"You're back sooner than expected," Brenner observed, looking up as Dyer came into the room. "More problems?"

She shook her head, shutting the door behind her. "The Byers woman brought the girl home already despite the doctors advising against it. I was unable to do more at the hospital, and I gave them my best sob story before departing."

He sat back in his chair. "Does this mean you were unsuccessful? We can't afford to have her go telling anyone about Nine or what happened to her family."

"I doubt she will. You did have the surveillance equipment installed in the home, didn't you?"

He nodded. "As soon as I knew she would get custody, it was taken care of. We are monitoring all communications in that house, though it was quiet while she was gone. I expect we'll have more of interest now that they have returned and a team has been tasked with monitoring that house in particular."

Dyer sat down across from him. "Nine is too dangerous to be allowed to live. You know this."

"I'm not certain I share your assessment. There is still a chance reconditioning him might work, and I would like to see for myself what he can do, as it's clear he's advanced since he left us. His ability to vanish completely when he leaves... that is of great interest to me."

"He's not the ignorant boy you kept under your thrall as 'Papa.' He won't do what you ask of him. He never did."

"You're being a little unfair. None of us knew his talents lay with fire and not other paths like Eight or Eleven. And compared to the first

four, he is a resounding success.”

Dyer snorted. “You say that because they were brain dead idiots who couldn't manage much of anything after the drugs their mothers did. Completely nonviable. Eleven is your only real success, and she is still far from where we want her to be.”

“Her telekenetic abilities are improving nicely,” Brenner said. He didn't mention that Eleven had killed the orderlies. Dyer would make the same recommendation about her as she had Nine. She did not understand the risk that this work required. Getting Nine back was essential now. He had to know what the boy could do beyond the abilities they'd documented. He always eluded them, disappearing into the fires, and that alone should have been impossible.

Something more was going on there, and Brenner wanted to know what it was.

He had many questions, and not just about Nine.

“Did you bring the samples I requested?”

Dyer nodded. “I had them delivered to the lab directly for analysis. The aunt was only too happy to donate blood in case her niece or anyone else came to need it, and I had plenty of access to the girl.”

“I want a full genetic work up done on both of them. You said they resemble each other strongly?”

“The girl could be her twin if they were the same age,” Dyer said, rising to take a photograph out of her pocket and pass it to him. He accepted it and studied it with a frown. She wasn't wrong about that. The two women were nearly identical. One was older, true, but she'd aged rather well and could probably still fool people into thinking the younger one was her twin.

“Interesting,” Brenner said, even more curious about that family now. He couldn't afford to allow it to distract him from his other experiments, but Nine was still his responsibility and this did tie to finding him. “Have them put a rush on those tests.”

“I'm a trained government agent, Martin. Not your lab assistant.”

"I know you are very good at maintaining an emotional distance from this project, from all of them, but aren't you the least bit curious?" Brenner asked. "I know you don't believe in coincidences. Our Nine finding a girl with ties to Hawkins to fall for... how unlikely do you think that is?"

"I'm sure one of your other eggheads can do the math for you," she said. "I agree it's unlikely. It doesn't mean it isn't coincidence. Bud Dean moved around for his work, and he was hired to demolish a building in Sherwood. Since the boy was traveling with him as his 'son,' he ended up there and met her."

"Yes, in a rather fortuitous turn of circumstances, seeing as he was going to evade you and your team and now because of her ties to Hawkins we have a much easier way to trap him in our own backyard. If we'd had to frame her for the fire and wait for him to make a move against her prison—"

"I'd have killed her first. That kind of action would have been too noticeable and no one up above would sanction it," Dyer said. "Here we can contain it. A prison would make national news. Unacceptable."

He nodded, giving some thought to others who'd made national news and lived. Terry Ives was no longer a threat to them, no, but she'd come close, trying to get her child back, the one that was the key to everything. A part of him wondered if Dyer would think Ives should be eliminated as well, even as fried as her brain was, as insane as everyone believed her to be.

"You have the tapes from the Sawyer home?"

"There's not much there."

Brenner looked at her. "I think we can both agree that knowing all of what Nine did there is necessary. Imagine if he'd actually consummated this... infatuation of his."

Dyer grimaced. "I'd rather not."

"The potential—"

"Does not outweigh the risks with Nine, and you know it," Dyer said. "I'll have the tapes brought to you and make sure they know your orders on the tests, but I still stand by my assessment—Nine is too dangerous to be allowed to live."

"And that may well be true," Brenner said. "Yet the scientist in me can't let it go without one last test, one more experiment just to be sure."

"She hasn't moved," Will whispered to his brother, eyeing the girl on the couch again. She was starting to creep him out. She had since she first walked in, looking as much like their mom as she did. Everything she did since just made it worse. It was like she was some kind of zombie or something, though she was dressed more like a vampire.

"She's still drugged, Mom said," Jonathan reminded him. "She took something for the pain because it was hard for her to sit still in the car. She was hurting too much."

Will frowned, watching her. "I don't know, Jonathan. She looks... insane."

"You're just mad because you lost your room," Jonathan told him. "It's temporary. We'll get a bigger space. Or we'll make one. We can get some wood and fix Castle Byers up nicer, too. It's going to be okay."

Will looked at him. "I'm not five. You can't pass me off with a few promises and pretend everything is fine. She is not fine."

Jonathan glanced toward Veronica. "No, she's not fine, but she was in a fire, Will. Her parents died. She's in pain, and she's on drugs. It's going to be a while before she acts normal."

"She's wearing Mom's coat."

"And that makes it a little harder, but it's not as bad as it seems," Jonathan said. "Come on. If we do a bit more, we can get your bed in my room tonight."

"Why?" Will asked. "Look at her. She's not even going to know what room she's in."

Jonathan sighed. "I... I guess you may as well have one more night in there, if Mom agrees, but at least help me move the shelf out of my room, okay? We'll put one of yours in for all your nerd books."

"Hey," Will said, and his brother grinned at him. Will rolled his eyes, hating being so easy, but he followed Jonathan anyway. "You think Mom will find a bed for her right away?"

"No," Jonathan admitted. "It'll be hard to find one we can afford, and even then, we'll have to find someone who can get it here unless it's in small enough pieces we can hang it out the back of the Pinto or something. So we'll need someone with a truck we can borrow for a day or something."

"Gee, what a shame it is you have no friends," Will said. "They'd probably have trucks."

"I have friends," Jonathan said, a bit defensive. "I've got you, right?"

Will nodded, though he knew that it was a little weird Jonathan didn't have any friends his own age. Maybe he would now, if one could count the creep on the couch, but Will wouldn't. It might be worse than having no friends at all.

"Which shelf are we moving this time?"

"That one."

"That one? It weighs a ton. Don't you remember when you brought it home? You and Mom could barely get it inside, and we pushed it most of the way. We can't move that one."

"We have to," Jonathan said, putting a hand on the desk. "This one's the only one big enough for my stereo, and your books won't fit on that one."

Will looked at his brother's room. "Wait, where are all of your books? And why is your closet so empty?"

"I told you. I made some room already."

"Yeah, but it's like... all your stuff is gone."

Jonathan shook his head. "Not the important stuff. I've got the clothes I actually wear, the books I need for school, and my stereo. That leaves plenty of space for you."

"Meanwhile, the creep out there gets a room to herself and has nothing."

"That's gonna change," Jonathan said. "Girls tend to have a lot more stuff than us. You just wait and see."

"What do you know about girls, anyway?"

"More than you do," Jonathan said, ruffling his hair. "Tell you what. You want to listen to the Clash while we work?"

Though Will knew it wouldn't make this much better, he nodded. "Sure."

November 5

Veronica hurried into the restroom, needing to get away and hide before the damned tears started again. She didn't understand. It was a smoothie, not a slushie. They weren't the same. Yes, they were both frozen mixed drinks made with ice, but they were not the same thing. They shouldn't remind her of him... or his hamster.

Still, she felt like a giant mess, and having some strangers buy her clothes didn't help any, since she felt so embarrassed, having to have someone else pay for her. Her parents had before, but that was different. She wasn't a charity case to her parents. She would have worked for her own money.

She supposed she should now.

She would talk to Joyce about that when she got back, about what

work there was in Hawkins and what she might be able to do. She snorted to herself at the idea of impersonating her aunt at work. It probably would work, other than her tendency to mouth off, but then they'd still be short any extra money and it wouldn't be enough.

Her parents had told her she'd be taken care of after they were gone, but that was a lie unless she counted Joyce, who'd come through for her in ways Veronica wouldn't have expected from the way her mom talked about her sister.

She went to the back stall and set her bag on the floor, closing the door behind her. Maybe she'd feel more like herself if she was in her own clothes, even if someone else bought them. Besides, she'd said that was what she was doing when she came in here, so she should.

She took off her aunt's shirt and put it to the side, hearing the door open behind her. She bent down to grab one of her new tops out of her bag and almost screamed when someone pulled the stall door open. The scream died on her lips when she saw him.

He pulled the door to the stall closed, shutting himself inside with her.

She swallowed. "You... you're alive... I thought... I thought you were dead... the fire... you were shot... you... never came..."

"It wasn't safe," he said, taking a step toward her and touching her face. "I wanted to, but they were there. They were watching. They're always watching. Today was the first time you were far enough away from them to try."

She winced, shuddering. She remembered that woman saying that, that she was bait for him.

He moved his hand down from her face and to her arm. "They hurt you."

She bit her lip. She'd been so confused about that, between the drugs and everything else. She swore she'd come out of the fire without being burned, but when she woke up in the hospital, she'd felt them, burns all over her, and she couldn't stop screaming.

"And he hurt you," he said, touching one of the bruises Lonnie had left on her when she couldn't get free of him.

She swallowed. "That fire... his car... that was you?"

He nodded. "I wanted to hurt him for touching you. Wanted to kill him. Only... they'd know I was there. They'd take you, hide you in the lab... make me go back there to get you... and they'd do so much worse than this to you..."

She gagged. He wrapped his arms around her, and she held onto him, still shaking.

"I missed you," he told her, and she wrapped her arms around his neck, wanting to be even closer to him even if this was a dream. "I wanted to come every day."

She almost laughed. "I talked to you almost every day. I would sit there and stare at the window and just tell you... everything. I... I even thought I saw you once. Climbed out and went after you but couldn't find you."

"I listened, when I could... I couldn't ever say anything back. They're listening. I... they'd kill your family. Not sure I care about the little kid, but the older one... he takes care of you... feeds you and takes you to school... and the other one... she looks like you... and she's... she's not like anyone I've known."

"She's a mom, and you have no experience with that at all," Veronica agreed. She looked up at him. "All this time... thinking you were dead, that I was crazy..."

"I'm sorry." He leaned his head against hers. "Would have kept you with me, but I was hurting too much to control the firewalk."

She had figured that much. "I... I just missed you. I lost everything... thought I lost you..."

"Never," he said. "Not even if I can't come to you. I'm yours."

She smiled stupidly, tilting her head up to kiss him. It went from sweet to frantic in no time, her pouring every bit of the last month's

desperation and hopelessness into a passion for him that surprised her but didn't feel wrong, either. She bumped into the handicapped rail, but she didn't care.

Then the door to the stall opened again, and she winced, thinking someone needed the stall for its intended purpose and she was only half dressed and she'd forgotten all about it.

“Shit.”

“Veronica?”

Oh, fuck. That was Barb. And Nancy.

He stepped back, pushing his way past both of them, and Veronica could only stare after him, too shocked to move right away.

“No...”

“Did he hurt you?” Nancy asked, looking back at the doors. The guy had bolted like there was no tomorrow, which suggested he had been up to no good, but then again, people weren't supposed to hook up in mall bathrooms and maybe he just left because he got caught.

Damn, Veronica had lousy taste in guys.

Then again, she was all over the place today, really upset and then back calm and happy when she was browsing that store and she was like a completely different person until they went to get food. Come to think of it, it was the smoothie thing that had set her off again.

Veronica didn't answer. She just kept staring at where he'd been.

“Why don't we start with putting your shirt on?” Barb said, grabbing one from the bag and handing it to Veronica, who was still staring at where he'd been. “Veronica?”

She stirred herself and grabbed the shirt, pulling it on with shaking hands. Then she pushed past them and ran toward the door. Nancy didn't know what else to do but follow her, thinking this was crazy, but then the whole day had been. Almost everything with Veronica

was, if Nancy was honest about it.

Barb joined her outside, touching Veronica's arm. The other girl jumped and rubbed her arms, and without the sweaters she normally wore, Nancy saw scars right where her hands were.

"He's gone," Veronica whispered, sounding upset. She tugged at the hem of a shirt, looking around again. "He's really gone."

"Okay, seriously," Nancy said, taking hold of her, getting Veronica to face her. "Did that guy—did you invite him in there or did he just come in? Did he hurt you? Was he trying to... um... force it?"

Veronica shook her head. "No. He didn't. It wasn't like that."

"Are you sure?" Nancy pressed, though it was a little strange her running out looking for that guy. Then again, maybe they were wrong about all of this. "Do you know him? What's his name?"

"He doesn't have a name."

"Jesus," Nancy said. "We know you're... um... hurting... a lot... but random hookups in a mall bathroom... That's... you need real help, Veronica."

Barb nudged her, but it wasn't like they could say nothing to that, even if they were standing in the middle of a mall. This was not good. Veronica had been about to screw a guy she didn't know in the bathroom. She was in worse shape than they'd thought. This was not okay. This was bad. They had to tell someone, do something... They had to get her out of here and back to Hawkins, for a start.

"Come on," Nancy said, taking her back toward the bathroom. "We need to get your stuff so we can go."

"I can't go," Veronica said. "Not now. Not when... He was here. You saw him, right? He was... here. He was really here and I wasn't imagining it..."

"None of us imagined that, trust me," Nancy said, and Barb frowned at her. She wasn't going to apologize. This whole situation was weird and maybe even a little scary. She pushed the restroom door open.

"Come on. We need to get your stuff so we can go."

Veronica stopped just outside the door, shaking her head. "I can't."

"I'll get her stuff," Barb said, going back to the stall to grab it. Veronica started to back away again, and Nancy caught her, wishing she was stronger and hoping she could hold her.

"Don't, okay? You... I'm sorry I was a bit harsh, but you're starting to scare me," Nancy told her. "We really do need to go. You... this is very public, and later, you'll probably hate yourself for freaking out here."

Veronica swallowed, taking another look around them. "Maybe he went outside? Less crowds. Less people. He'd want less people."

Nancy sincerely hoped that there was no one out there, but she needed Veronica to go out to the car, so she'd take it. Barb came back with the rest of the bags and gave Veronica a nervous smile. "We're going out to the car."

"He might be there."

Barb's eyes widened, but Nancy just shook her head, trying to tell her not to fight this. Veronica might not leave otherwise. They led her out to the car, her eyes frantically scanning the lot like she was looking for that creep, which was so wrong, but Nancy just wanted her to get in the car so they could go, and they were almost there.

Barb stopped, passing Nancy the bags so she could unlock the door. She grabbed Veronica's cigarettes out of the bag and held them out to her. "Would this help?"

Veronica looked at them and shuddered. "I thought... he left them for me... but that's crazy... I'm crazy... No. You saw him. You both saw him. He was there, right? I'm not crazy. I know it looks like it, but he was here, so I'm not. It happened. He was there and..."

"Wait, I thought you said he didn't have a name," Barb said, holding onto the door. "You know him, but he doesn't have a name? I'm sorry. You're not making sense."

"I..." Veronica swallowed. "He... I wasn't supposed to see him. My parents... thought he was bad, but he's not. He's... screwed up... abusive father... but he was a sweetheart to me. Asked me to keep his hamster for him."

Nancy found that a little hard to believe. "And he just... shows up here, in Indianapolis, at the same mall we happen to be at?"

"I didn't know he'd be here," Veronica said. "I... I was afraid he was dead... It... His father's company moves around the country... he'd been dragged all over... I guess they're here now. He would have come for a smoothie. Maybe. He... he loves slushies. Named his hamster that."

Barb snorted. "Sorry. That's a terrible name for a hamster."

Veronica nodded. "I know, but he didn't. He's... the way he was raised was... really bad and he doesn't fully understand the way the world works."

Nancy was still skeptical. "Like having sex in mall bathrooms?"

"What? We only kissed."

Nancy was the one to snort that time. "You weren't dressed."

Veronica winced, running a hand through her hair. "I... I was in the middle of changing when he came in. I didn't..."

"Damn, you are such a trouble magnet," Nancy said, and Veronica looked up at her. "Come on. First the fire, then Lonnie Byers, now a random creep in a mall? Your aunt is going to want to put you in bubble wrap after this."

"You can't tell her about this."

Barb frowned. "Come on, Veronica. You can't ask that of us. That guy could have really hurt you."

"Not if it was really him," Veronica insisted. "I told you that. He's... confused and he's been hurt and he... he never had anyone be genuinely nice to him before me. He wouldn't hurt me."

“This guy ran as soon as we came in. You think it was really him?”

Veronica bit her lip. “I did. I... If it was him, then I'm not insane. I didn't make it all up, and he's not dead so I didn't lose everything and —”

“Shh,” Barb said, pulling her into a hug. “Look, you've been through a lot. And... I think this guy tried to take advantage of that. I'm sorry. It wasn't him.”

Veronica shuddered, and Nancy winced, wanting to look away from this. It was so hard to watch. She didn't even know what to think. Had Veronica been so desperate to see her old boyfriend that she'd imagined some creep was him? She'd been erratic all day, so it wouldn't have been hard for someone who looked a bit similar and who cornered her and probably caused a panic to push her over the edge.

It was also a bit hard to believe that someone from Ohio had just happened to show up here today when they happened to be here. If Veronica had called him, sure, maybe, but she hadn't called him. She said she thought he was dead.

“We should go,” Nancy said, not wanting to stay here any longer. She had the unpleasant feeling like they were being watched, and if they were, it had to be that creep. They shouldn't stay a minute longer than they had to.

11. Chapter 11

Summary for the Chapter:

Moving Veronica in goes badly. Nancy and Barb are worried. So is Joyce. Hopper is confused... and suspicious.

Notes for the Chapter:

I didn't think I'd have time to get any updates today. Technically, I didn't, as I should be sleeping, but as much as I should, I'm not tired, and it's so frustrating, but at least I finished something. I might have to wait comment replies until later as I really, really have to try and sleep, but I got an update. I'm so proud of myself for no good reason.

October 2

“She still hasn't moved. This is so creepy,” Will said, and Jonathan reached over to smack him. Admittedly, it was hard to believe Veronica had slept sitting up like that, but she wasn't asleep now, and it wasn't right to talk about her like she wasn't there.

“She's fine where she is,” Jonathan said. “If she wants to move, she will. She can.”

“I'm starting to think she won't.” Will eyed her again, shaking his head. “You think maybe she's... not all there? Like... she lost something in that fire and... it's just gone forever?”

“You have a very good imagination, but I think she's just drugged,” Jonathan told him. “Burns hurt, remember? That time you had to touch the stove anyway despite everyone warning you not to, and then you had that mark in your hand that looked like the burner and you couldn't stop crying... You wanted a new hand because yours was

ruined.”

Will grimaced. “I didn't understand how that worked, okay?”

Jonathan smiled. “I know. And I know that we all have the same stupid urge to touch burners or other things we know better than to do. I've done plenty of it myself. I just wanted to remind you how much pain she's in so you understand why she'd be... more likely to take drugs and not move around much, if at all. I'd be it hurts even with pain medication.”

Will gave her another glance. “Still... it's weird. She looks way too much like Mom.”

“You're determined to see her as weird,” Jonathan said, and Will shrugged. Jonathan hoped that she'd come out of whatever she was in right now, but that didn't have to be rushed. It might be better if they had her room ready for her by the time she was out of whatever it was she was in now. “Hey, didn't your friends say they'd come over to help with moving stuff around and putting the new bed together?”

“Yeah, but I figured you'd still end up doing the bed,” Will told him. “Remember Castle Byers?”

“That's different,” Jonathan said, though he was struggling not to laugh, picturing how terrible Will was with a hammer and nails. That had taken all night because every time he swung, he missed, but he so wanted to do it himself. “It would probably be screws, not nails, and there's no aiming involved, which seems to be Will the Wise's problem. How do you win at Dungeons and Dragons anyhow? Is it just the dice roll?”

“It's magic,” Will reminded him. “You don't have to aim as well when it's magic. Well, no, if you don't roll high enough you miss, so... you have to aim, but...”

“I'm just teasing,” Jonathan assured him with a smile, not wanting to depress him more when the whole situation was stressing everyone out. That, and for as much as Will played that game and Jonathan heard all about each session, he didn't understand it or want to. Dungeons and Dragons was Will's thing, and photography was

Jonathan's. They had separate interests as well as the ones that they shared, which was the way it worked with any set of friends or brothers.

He and Will were close, and he didn't kid himself that it wasn't partially because Lonnie left it up to him to raise his brother when their mom was wearing herself down everyday trying to earn enough to keep the roof over their heads.

He didn't need or want to think about that right now, especially not since he was afraid he was going to be stuck taking care of Veronica, too.

Hell, he already was, since his mom had to work and it wasn't like Will could handle her. She wasn't in any state to take care of herself right now. Jonathan didn't need or want this, but he supposed he was stuck with it, so he'd make the best of it. He always tried to, since it didn't take long with a father like Lonnie to understand that life was never going to be about what they wanted or even needed but just what they could do to scrape by.

“Why don't you radio the others and see if they're coming by or not? We've still got a lot to do after we get your bed in my—our room.”

“Hey, Mrs. Byers,” Dustin called out, seeing her on the couch. She didn't acknowledge him, so he shrugged. Lucas followed after him, giving her a wave, but Mike stopped and stared, almost like he'd never seen Will's mom before.

Lucas turned back and grabbed him by the arm. “Dude, we're supposed to be helping in here.”

If he was honest about it, he didn't know how much help they would be. They might be good when it came to science, but they were a little less so in the engineering aspect, and he didn't want to think about Will putting together a bed, not after that disaster that was their first attempt at a science fair project two years ago.

“Mrs. Byers?” Mike asked. “Are you... okay?”

She stared right through him, not answering, and he frowned some more, not the only one to, since she was acting really weird now that Mike had to point it out.

“Uh, Will,” Mike called out. “Will, where are you?”

While they were waiting for the other boy to come back down the hall, Dustin went over to her and waved his hand right in front of her face.

“She could be drunk,” Lucas said, though when he'd seen his dad get that far, it didn't look like this. “Or something.”

“What are you doing out here?” Will said. “Jonathan and I told you just to come on in to the room.”

“Yeah, we know, but,” Mike looked at her again. “Is something wrong with your mom?”

Will shook his head. “That's not Mom. That's Veronica.”

“What?” The three of them asked at the same time.

“No way,” Lucas said. “She looks exactly like your mom. She's wearing your mom's coat. She's your mom. Has to be. Your cousin would not look that much like your mom. Quit trying to mess with us. It's not going to work.”

“Yeah,” Dustin said. “Not cool, man. Not cool.”

Will rolled his eyes. “Did you look at the hair? Did you notice the creepy way she stares at nothing? That's not my mom. That's Veronica. Ask Jonathan if you don't believe me. Mom's not even here. She's working. Again. Like always.”

Mike looked at her. “I don't know, Will. It's kind of hard to believe it's not her, even if it's not really like your mom to prank us.”

“Just ask Jonathan. It's not Mom. It's Veronica.”

“What is she?” Mike asked, studying her. “A vampire? What's with all the black and the weird staring?”

“Jonathan says it's pain medication, and I don't know about the black.”

“It's weird.”

“I know,” Will said. “I've been saying it since Mom brought her home yesterday. Jonathan says she'll get better when she's not on the medication, but it's still going to be weird because she looks exactly like my mom.”

“Freaky,” Dustin agreed. He looked back at them. “Should we like... poke her with something and see if she reacts?”

“Seriously?” Lucas asked. “We are not talking about something dead we found in the woods here.”

“Gross, Lucas,” Will said. “She's not dead. At least... I don't think so.”

“I say we poke her,” Dustin said. “Only way to find out what's going on with her.”

“Not the only way,” Lucas said, thinking they could find other ways. Maybe a loud noise or something. Poking her would probably only end one way, and he didn't think they wanted to see it.

“I'll do it,” Dustin said, and before Lucas or anyone could stop him, he had pushed a finger right into her arm.

She shrieked, jumping up from the couch and swearing profusely, a bunch of words that Lucas didn't think Mrs. Byers knew. She took in the rest of them and screamed again, climbing up and back up against the wall, shuddering.

“Dustin.”

“I didn't know,” he said, throwing up his hands and trying to look innocent.

“What the hell is going on out here?” Jonathan demanded, coming around the corner. He took them in and then her. “What did you do?”

“She was staring, so I touched her,” Dustin said, and Lucas wondered if he was making his lisp worse on purpose. “I didn’t do it that hard, just touched her arm.”

“She totally freaked,” Mike said. “It wasn’t—we didn’t really do anything. We were just standing here, other than Dustin, but she screamed when she saw us anyway.”

Jonathan just shook his head. He went toward her. “Veronica, it’s Jonathan. You remember we met last night? These are Will’s friends, and apparently they were kind of stupid, but they’re not going to hurt you.”

She looked at Dustin, shaking her head, and Jonathan muttered something under his breath. He cleared his throat, speaking louder.

“Okay, did he hit one of the burns? Is that what happened?”

She shivered, and Jonathan held out a hand to her. “Come on. You can have Mom’s room until we’re done with yours, and no one will bother you in there. If you want, I can look at the burn, see if you need anything for it.”

She shook her head again, not taking his hand. Jonathan sighed, reaching for her and helping her down, careful not to touch her more than he had to. She trembled, whimpering when she touched the floor again.

“Is it time for your medication again?”

She screamed again and ran down the hall, shutting herself in the bathroom, the door slamming behind her.

“Way to go, Dustin.”

Joyce rushed the last bit of the drive, knowing she shouldn’t, but she was tired, and Jonathan’s call had been weighing on her ever since she got it. She couldn’t get anyone else to cover for her, had to stay and close, and every minute dragged when she knew she needed to get out of there.

She'd almost forgotten what Jonathan told her about Will's friends coming over, but she remembered before she left town and got something from the deli for supper, knowing she had to do something.

She was the worst mom, and she knew that this sort of thing would never happen to Karen Wheeler. That was only one of many reasons why the boys usually hung out at her house.

Not that she thought it wasn't sweet of them to help Will move, but it was supposed to make things easier, not worse.

She brought the food inside and set it on the table before she rounded the corner to see all of them standing outside her bathroom door. She knew that was not helping, not if Veronica was in there.

"She still hasn't come out?" Joyce asked, coming down the hall. Jonathan shook his head, clearly worried.

"I didn't mean to, Mrs. Byers. I didn't know about the burns or whatever it was," Dustin told her. "I was just trying to wake her up, and she freaked out."

"He poked her with his finger," Lucas explained. "Um... right on her arm."

Joyce winced. "Okay, boys, I'm not sure that we should have to make this a rule, but in the future, when you meet someone new, don't just go touching them without their permission, okay? I know she's all covered in the coat and you can't see the bandages, but she is very badly burned, so you can't do that sort of thing to her."

"She also screamed when she saw us," Mike said. "It wasn't all what Dustin did. She freaked out when Jonathan tried to give her more medicine."

Joyce sighed. So many things were delicate when it came to Veronica again. "Okay, boys, thank you for your help, and I brought home some food for everyone. It's in the kitchen. Go ahead and eat now."

She waited for the younger boys to leave, the call of food almost always irresistible to them. "Jonathan, I am so sorry I didn't tell you

about the medication thing. I have been all over trying to get things together, and I didn't—I shouldn't have left today, but Donald only gave me the two days off and it's such a—”

“Mom, it's fine. They were stupid, poking her like that, but I suppose we should have expected it. I should have,” Jonathan said. “What's with the medication, though?”

“She doesn't like it. They tried to give her some in the hospital and she freaked out there. It's not just the needles. She doesn't like the pills, either. She really only took the one because she hurt too much to sit still in the car,” Joyce explained. Jonathan nodded, still looking worried. “This is not your fault. Go in with the boys and eat something. And thank you, again, for everything you do. I don't say that nearly enough.”

“Once is enough, Mom,” he said, and she gave him a bit of a smile because it so wasn't.

She turned back to the door, knocking on it. “Veronica? It's Joyce. Can I come in?”

The door opened and her niece looked at her, frowning.

“I'm sorry about the boys,” Joyce began. “They're young, curious, impulsive... I'm sorry. Can I look at your arm for you?”

Veronica looked down at her hand, her words breaking Joyce's heart. “I want to go home.”

November 5

“She's still asleep,” Nancy said, looking back at Veronica in the backseat. She felt terrible again, since despite the other girl's attempt to hide it, she'd been crying when she got in the car and all the way until she fell asleep.

“It's probably better that way. She was really upset when we left,” Barb said. She twisted her lip as she glanced at the rearview mirror.

“Do you think she could be right about who it was?”

Nancy almost wished she was because the alternative was pretty wrong, and Veronica could have been really hurt by that guy, but at the same time, she had a hard time believing it was her ex-boyfriend. “Why would he leave?”

“Because she’s not supposed to see him?” Barb suggested. “Maybe he thought she’d be in trouble if she was seen with him, so he left as quick as he could.”

“I don’t know, Barb. I think you’re giving him too much credit,” Nancy said. She still couldn’t accept that someone who cared about Veronica would just leave her like that. “No, she... she mistook whoever it was for that guy because she really wanted to see him. It’s... sad, but it’s not something we can change by pretending it didn’t happen. We need to tell Mrs. Byers about what happened.”

“I know, I just... I feel so bad for her,” Barb said. “This was supposed to be a nice trip, and she ended up panicking and crying and that guy —”

“I know,” Nancy cut her off, not wanting to think about that again. Veronica could have ended up raped, and that was just... so wrong.

“I don’t think she should be alone tonight.”

Nancy glanced back at the other girl. What was it like in that house, with Will and his friends calling her a vampire and Joyce never home because she was working? Veronica must feel so alone there, even if Jonathan was home, and he was probably working, too.

“I agree, but we’ll have to see what Mrs. Byers thinks when we talk to her,” Nancy said. Barb nodded. Nancy looked at her. “Why do I get the feeling you don’t want to tell her everything?”

“I... I guess I’m afraid if we do, she won’t let us do anything with Veronica again,” Barb admitted, and Nancy frowned. A part of her wasn’t even sure she wanted to, as much as she had thought befriending her was the right thing to do and she still wanted to help. “She needs someone.”

"She needs more help than we can give, though," Nancy reminded her. "If she's willing to go that far in the mall bathroom—"

"With her boyfriend. She believed it was her boyfriend, and aren't you getting plenty cozy with Steve?"

Nancy glared at her. "Just because Steven and I are supposed to meet tonight doesn't mean Veronica doesn't have problems."

"Of course she does, but she wasn't even talking to anyone before. Now she is, and we might be throwing away what little trust we've gained."

That was true, but at the same time, they couldn't just ignore this. "Yeah, but we can't be responsible for her sanity. I don't think we can do enough. She needs more."

"I know, but I don't want to risk her shutting us out, either."

Nancy sighed. "I don't. I just... I don't know what to do. I want to help, but I think this is too much for the two of us. Veronica's issues go deeper than that fire, and she could be very self-destructive. We can't really afford to hide that from anyone."

Barb nodded. "No, if she's doing something that would get her hurt or something, we can't just let it go, but if it was really her boyfriend and she made out with him, it's not the same thing."

"You're always the one trying to ground me in reality," Nancy reminded her. "Why are you so quick to jump on the fantasy here?"

"I don't know," Barb said. "I guess... I just think she's had enough bad happen. It would be nice if there was something good for a change."

Joyce looked up as the bell rang. She would really like this shift to be over, as business was slow and her double was dragging on and on. They always did, though sometimes when they were busy it didn't seem as long. She didn't have time to think about all the things she would rather be doing, all the things she should be doing for her family and her home.

She watched her niece walk in, stunned by the change in her look.

“Wow, sweetheart. You look amazing. I didn’t—I know I didn’t send any money—I wish I could have but—”

“I know. I understand,” she said, looking down at her shirt and wincing. She shook her head. “I was going to talk to you about maybe getting a job of my own. I just... I don’t think anyone’s going to hire me as I’m completely psycho.”

Joyce was going to hurt whoever said that to her. Veronica was going through a tough time. She was not crazy. “Oh, that is not—”

“I couldn’t breathe in the changing room, I started crying when they asked about smoothies even though it’s really slushies and... and I made out with someone... and I’ve lost the only friends I’ve made in this shitty town.”

Joyce winced. “Oh, I don’t think that they’d hate you or anything for that. Well, not for the panic or the crying. We all have moments like that. Me more than anyone, I guess, but even girls like Nancy and Barb do. I know they do. Give them a big test or a first date, and they’d be just as nervous. If they lost someone, they’d cry. They would—Did you really—”

“I did,” Veronica said. “They think I need therapy.”

“I’m not so sure you don’t, but I don’t...” Joyce didn’t know how to respond to this. Veronica was in a very bad place right now, and some guys would use that. Lonnie sure as hell had. “I didn’t know you had a boyfriend. Or that he was here in Indiana.”

“I don’t have a boyfriend in Hawkins. I guess... I could have had a boyfriend if I was allowed to see him and if he... I don’t know... moved around a lot... or if he wasn’t dead... or... something.”

Joyce frowned. “Okay, you’ve lost me. You’re not supposed to see him and he’s dead?”

She shrugged. “There was a guy. My parents didn’t like him. He... he dressed like a rebel and his... his guardian was abusive, so he... he lied to people, said he was the liar and a troublemaker and made

people think he was dangerous... he was only ever sweet to me.”

“Um,” Joyce began, finding an unpleasant echo in her relationship with Lonnie in her niece's words. “Veronica...”

“It’s not like I’ll see him again. I just figured I’d better tell you my side of things before they tell you theirs.”

Joyce shook her head. “I would listen to yours any time, and I think we do need to talk about this more, and if we could—”

“Not now. Nancy has a date, and I need a smoke,” Veronica said, darting out again. Joyce stared after her, almost wishing they were still in the days when Veronica wasn't saying much at all. She felt so lost and unable to do anything for her right now.

The bell rang again, and she saw the other girls coming in.

“Mrs. Byers?” Nancy began. “Um, I don't know what Veronica told you—”

“She confused me is what she did,” Joyce said. “So... she panicked in the changing room, cried, and made out with some stranger?”

“Wow, I so did not think she would tell you all that,” Nancy said, frowning. “Um, but yes. All of that happened. I was looking at shirts when the panic happened. Barb was with her.”

“She had on a dress that looked really good on her, but she suddenly couldn't breathe in it, couldn't get it off, and I had to help her and remind her to breathe. She was almost over it, said she wanted to leave, and then Nancy brought up the food court, and she started crying when Nancy mentioned getting a smoothie.”

“Okay, yeah, she said that. Something about slushies?”

“An old boyfriend's hamster,” Barb said. “I think it's dead and that's part of it, but she wasn't exactly coherent about most of this.”

“Then things were good for a while. We found a shop she used to go to in Ohio, she helped us find what we needed and she found stuff she used to wear, and we bought her some of it because we'd already

planned on it, and it was good until we were about to leave. I wanted food first, and I brought up the smoothie. She said she wanted to put on one of her new outfits, so we split up for a while.”

“Only we ate our food and she hadn't come back, so we went to find her and she was with a guy.”

That was about all of it, and it was scary as hell. “Just... a guy. Some random guy?”

“He reminded her of an ex,” Nancy said. “And she was super vulnerable, so... she probably let him do more than she should have, but he didn't hurt her and we interrupted them kissing, so... It could have been worse, but it wasn't.”

“Okay,” Joyce said, still feeling her failure as a mother, a guardian. “Thank you for telling me. And taking her with you. Everything you've done—and this is not your fault. She's just... really struggling, and I am so glad there are nice girls like the two of you that are trying to help her.”

“I don't think we can do enough,” Nancy said. “She... She did kind of scare us with the bathroom thing. That's... too far.”

“It is, and I am going to... I've been trying to make arrangements with a therapist that specializes in trauma. I just haven't been able to yet. Veronica's parents left her money, but the lawyers haven't given it to us yet and—I fully intend to pay you back for all of this when they stop jerking us around—”

“You don't have to,” Barb said. “We wanted to do it. And it really did make her happy to find that stuff. It was worth it, even if... it didn't last.”

Nancy nodded. “I agree. I just... I want to do more, but I don't think we can.”

“I can,” Barb said, and Nancy looked at her. “That is... I mean... I wanted to see if you'd be okay with her staying over at my house. I know it's short notice and she really hasn't... her day was rough, and I don't think she should be alone.”

Joyce looked at her. "I swear, I want to hug you so much right now. Both of you, but... you're sure you want to? After all this, maybe she should come home. I will be—oh, no. No one's home. Will's gone, Jonathan's working, and I won't be off until late. Um... if you would keep her company at least until I get off, that would be so wonderful, and I'll stop and get her on my way home. I think you're right. She shouldn't be alone."

Someone knocked on his office door. Hop glared at it. He was fresh off his afternoon pill and not in the mood for company of any kind. This had better be good.

The door swung open and a voice asked, "Do you know what a listening device looks like? You know, a bug?"

Hop looked up with a frown. The question wasn't the only thing that was weird. He was looking at Joyce's double again, though this time she was definitely not Joyce. He didn't think anyone would ever get Joyce into that, even if it would probably look nice on her, too. "What?"

"What would it look like if someone had put a listening device in our house? Would it be small? How small? And where would they put it if they had?"

Hop looked over Joyce's niece, trying to understand what he was hearing. "You think your house is bugged?"

"I didn't say you did it."

"I know I didn't. We don't really have that kind of equipment," Hop told her, still frowning. "Why do you think there's a bug in your house?"

She winced. "Never mind. That's crazy. I'm going to go."

She started to leave, and it took Hop a second to pull himself together after that one. Something was definitely going on with her, and he wanted to know what the hell it was. He rose, hurrying to the door and calling after her. "Wait a minute. Since you're here, there's

a couple questions I want to ask you.”

She turned back to look at him. “About Lonnie?”

“Actually, no,” Hop said, gesturing for her to come back into the office. He didn't need his suspicions getting around. They had enough rumors about Veronica and Joyce as it was, and they didn't need to start more. He gestured to the chair as he shut the door behind them. “Have a seat.”

She did, still frowning at him. “Tell me this town is not that small.”

“What?”

“This isn't about what I did at the mall?”

“No,” he said, though he was very, very curious about that now. “This is about the fire.”

She stared at him. “What about the fire?”

“How did you get burned?” he asked, not sure how else to start it. This seemed like the best way, just asking about how she got injured. “Did you bump something on your way out or—”

“I... I don't remember,” she said, her voice a little shaky. “I... There was... I don't remember getting burned. I was fine... and then I woke up in the hospital and I was in pain and burned. I don't know what happened.”

He found that hard to believe, given the kind of scars she had. Someone had forced them on her, he was almost certain of it. “Were your parents ever... abusive?”

She snorted. “Only if you count Mom's insistence on turning everything into pâté. She was a lousy cook. Ten times worse than Joyce.”

That almost had him smiling. “Joyce isn't that bad.”

“Jonathan is better.”

He didn't think he wanted to know that. "So, your parents. They never... disciplined you harshly or used physical—"

"No. God, no. Why would you—Oh." She looked down at her feet. "You think I set the fire, too. That's what everyone says. That I killed them and I'm psycho."

"I didn't—"

I may be insane, but I didn't kill them. I didn't set the fire. Everything after I found myself in the yard is a blur because the hospital drugged me, and I don't know what all happened, but I didn't do it. I didn't hurt them. And they didn't hurt me. And all of you can go to hell for thinking that."

"Hey," he said, rising. "Calm down. Now, I can explain why I thought that, and it's got nothing to do with rumors or a bunch of small town idiots. You willing to listen to me?"

She frowned. "Why would I—"

"Because you didn't get this burn in an ordinary fire," he said, holding out the picture to her. "This kind of burn, it happens when someone holds something hot on your skin for a long time. This is not from you escaping a house fire. None of them are."

"And you thought I did it myself?" Veronica asked. She snorted. "Okay, I admit, I like to smoke, but I'm not a pyromaniac. I didn't torture myself. I didn't kill my parents."

"Someone did, didn't they?"

She shook her head. "I don't—it was a gas explosion. That's what they said. It took two houses, one the night before, then ours. It's not some great... mystery. I get you're bored here in this place because there's nothing here but rumor, but I am not here to be entertainment."

"You are so much like your aunt."

"Um... I think I'd take that as a compliment if I didn't think you had a thing for her."

“What?”

“We're done now,” Veronica said, rising, and he swore, knowing she'd gotten him with that, thrown out that remark just to distract him and it had worked all too well.

He let her go, settling in his chair again.

She'd asked about bugs. Why the hell would she think they were being bugged?

Shit.

Did she think the people who killed her parents were listening in? Who the hell were these people? Why kill them? Why leave her alive?

What the hell had happened in that fire?

12. Chapter 12

Summary for the Chapter:

Veronica continues to have trouble adjusting to her new home and life after Ohio.

Suspicious are everywhere.

Notes for the Chapter:

This ended up a bit shorter than the last few, but I think it's a better place to leave it to finish off the fifth of November, meaning I can start moving into season one and what changes there. I almost went right there, but there's still a lot of emotional fallout going on and I have been trying to be responsible about following up on it even though I'm not always so good about it.

And it was a bit hard to do after working overnight and being sick the entire time, but I... liked the part with Barb and Veronica, so that's something.

Oh, and I suppose if anyone is bothered by vague references to certain necessary feminine care needs, you can skip Barb's scene (third one in) because she's at the store for a reason.

October 3

“Here,” Joyce said, leading Veronica into her room. “I know that none of this is... what you're used to, what you want to wear, or any of that. I was just... we're about the same size, and I'm afraid I spent the last of my paycheck on the bed. Next time we can go shopping and get something, hopefully before, since if your money comes, we're definitely spending that on everything you need. Clothes, toiletries, stuff for your bedroom. I'm not sure how much they'll give

us, but if we could find a bigger place to rent with it, that would help. Or maybe we can add on, though I'm not sure I trust the boys to do much of that. You should see Will swing a hammer."

Veronica didn't look up during any of Joyce's rambling. She didn't respond, just went through the clothes with a frown, taking the darkest things from the ones Joyce had offered. She'd made sure to do laundry before making the offering, but it still felt so inadequate. She didn't need a lot of clothes, not in the same way the boys did—Will was still growing, even if he was shorter than most of his friends—and Jonathan might be done growing but certainly went through his stuff faster than she did, with his job a lot more physically demanding than her own.

Joyce spent most of her time in a Melvald's apron anyway, so there wasn't much point in a lot of extra clothes, just enough to keep her going between washings, since she barely had a day off to do laundry.

"These."

"Are you sure you don't—"

"These," Veronica repeated. She bit her lip and added a hand to her mouth, dropping the clothes and running to the bathroom.

Joyce followed after her, wincing as she heard the girl puking. She wet a cloth and brought it over to her as she finished. "I didn't know your stomach was upset."

Veronica looked up, completely miserable. "Medicine."

"It makes you sick to your stomach?"

Veronica nodded.

Joyce sighed. "Okay, let's get you back to your room. You can lay down for now until you feel better. I'll get you a bowl just in case and some crackers..."

Veronica let her lead her back to the other room. She sat the girl down on the bed, suddenly aware of how wrong Will's room seemed

without all of his things in it. This was so wrong, the bare walls and empty shelves. They had to change things.

She knew they didn't have the money for that, though. She'd try calling the lawyer later. In the meantime, she had to make sure Veronica was settled. She didn't remember anyone telling them that nausea was a side effect of the medication or that they should be watching for it. She would have liked some warning, though Veronica's refusal to take her meds made more sense now.

She went into the kitchen and took down the big bowl from the cupboard.

"You don't have time to cook," Jonathan said, frowning. "You're on a split. You have to leave soon to get back to close. What are you doing?"

"I know my schedule," Joyce said, feeling a bit defensive that Jonathan thought he had to remind her of it. He did too much, and she wished she could make it easier for him, but she couldn't, any more than she could make it easier for herself. "I just—Veronica's not feeling well. I'm giving her the puke bowl, in case you missed it."

He eyed it. Will had named it that a long time ago, since it was an ugly color as well as the one they always used when someone was sick. She'd gotten it at a discount at Karen's Tupperware party because the saleswoman was having trouble selling it in that color.

"What happened?"

"Her medication," Joyce said. "If you can, check on her every once and a while. I have to head out in a few minutes."

"I will."

"Thank you." Joyce kissed his cheek and headed out the door.

Veronica fought a groan as the nausea rolled over her a second time. She almost wanted to give up on this and get her pain meds, fall asleep and end the torment, but she didn't want to. She didn't want to be stuck in that fog again, even if she really hurt now and couldn't

stop getting sick to her stomach.

She felt like she didn't know what was real, and Will's friends coming up to her like they had the day before had scared her, a lot, and she didn't want to repeat it again. She wanted to know when people were around her.

She wanted to know if he was around her. She wanted to believe that he was alive, but she didn't know. She would only know if he came, and she could hope, but if she was too drugged up to tell if people were there, how was she going to know if he was?

She closed her eyes with a wince. She knew, realistically, that she shouldn't want him to come. It wasn't like he was normal guy or that it wasn't dangerous to be around him. He'd warned him, and maybe there was a part of her that hadn't really believed it, even after the "social worker" came to the door looking for him.

She knew that they could have been telling the truth about him. He was her pyromaniac, she'd joked about that, but it wasn't half as funny when she'd seen the fire burst up around them. She'd seen a man burning alive and only turned away when he started firing his gun and she tried to hide.

Then her mother wasn't moving. And her father was already gone.

If she thought about it, their deaths... they were her fault. His fault. It all happened because he came to her. He'd done it for a simple, pure reason, his devotion to that poor hamster still so unbelievably adorable, but it had cost her everything. She could hate him for that. She didn't, she thought she had feelings that went way too far into the other direction, and she didn't know what to do.

She wanted him back.

She didn't know how to cope with him being dead. She missed him, almost as much as she missed her parents. It wasn't worth them dying if he'd died, too, and if he was gone... What was the point of any of this? She'd insisted on helping him—he needed it, powers or not—and gotten her parents killed.

And for what? For nothing?

She curled up on her side, the tears coming again. She couldn't believe what she'd done, what she'd managed to cause. Even if—could she have done something different, something that would have saved them?

She could have run with him, if he'd let her.

She could have turned him away from her window, but he just wanted a place for a hamster. What was so wrong about that?

There wasn't anything, aside from why he was trying to find a place for the poor thing. The whole thing had been almost... innocent.

And not, but still not as bad as a Remington party could have been or other things she'd done.

She didn't understand. Why had she—they—had to suffer over something so... benign? He was just a lost kid looking for a home—not even for himself, for a defenseless animal. She should have let him go or done something, anything to get her parents out safe, but she'd still thought—she hadn't really understood just how far these people would go to get to him.

She looked around her blank walls and empty room, letting out a sigh. Was he even real? That kind of stuff, he stuff he could do, it didn't exist outside of fiction. So he shouldn't exist. She had somehow fooled herself into thinking—no, he was real. He had to be real.

But why did she not remember getting burned in the fire if she actually had been burned? Where had those burns come from?

She didn't know. She didn't understand.

They hurt, so they were real, and she felt them constantly, but she couldn't remember getting them. If they were real, and she hadn't been burned in the fire—no, she had to have been burned in the fire—so she was burned and—none of it was real besides the fire?

She almost wished she'd taken the drugs.

Barb smiled nervously at Mrs. Byers, ducking into the back of the general store, not wanting to be seen on this particular errand. It was never easy to have to do this, and she really preferred it when her mom did this kind of shopping for her, but she'd run out before her mom's usual trip, and she kind of had to have something now.

She was in aisle, trying to work herself up to grabbing some pads off the shelf and wishing she didn't feel like she was wearing a diaper or something when she wore them. She didn't like tampons very much, they made her uncomfortable, and so she was going to have to look like she had a diaper on and endure what Carol said because there weren't any of the smaller kind here on the shelf.

She bit her lip. Maybe if she asked Joyce, she could find some in the backroom?

No. She couldn't do that. She was already getting red, and the school secretary was up at the counter, so no. She wasn't doing that.

"So, Joyce," Mrs. Carter began. "I hear you have company."

"What?"

"Oh, come now, dear," Carter said like she wasn't a snake. She even smiled like she was being kind or something. "It's Hawkins, remember? Everyone knows each other around here, and when a stranger comes into town, we all know."

"I wasn't—Veronica hasn't even been out of the house," Joyce said, sounding a bit flustered. "And I don't know that it's anyone's business that she's here. What would it matter if I had company?"

"Well, of course, I'm sure people wouldn't want to pry any, but as you have taken in a young woman still of school age, of course I should know. Such a tragedy, really, what happened to her family, but I'm sure you weren't planning on neglecting her education."

Barb frowned. What was this? Who was Veronica and why did Carter even care?

"My niece just got out of the hospital," Joyce said. "And she also just lost her parents. I am not rushing her into school right now. She's

been here two days. Two days. And she will be in school when she's ready for it and not a minute sooner."

"Of course, dear. I just wanted to be sure you knew about your options. We have some... alternate programs for students with challenges."

"Challenges?" Joyce demanded. "Is that what you're calling disabilities these days? Screw that. Veronica is not retarded. She's traumatized, and if it were up to me, I don't think I'd send her to your school for you treat her like she's brain damaged."

"Really, now. You are far too defensive," Carter said. "And I am the secretary for the middle school, not the high school, so I suppose you have your wish there."

"The middle school. Right. Veronica is seventeen. When she goes to school, she'll be in high school, which you already know, so it's no damned business of yours whether or not I've enrolled her or when I enroll her. It will be when she's ready for it, and not a minute before. You owe thirty-six ninety-five. Pay up and go."

"Your idea of customer service is appalling. I will speak to Donald about this."

"Go ahead."

Barb wanted to leave herself, not wanting to go up after that, not wanting anyone to know she heard it. The bell clanged for the door, and she flinched. She sighed, grabbing the pads, and going up to the counter. She didn't have much of a choice. This was an emergency.

"Stupid old hag," Joyce muttered. She saw Barb and grimaced. "Sorry. I'm a little stressed right now. I—Are you sure you want these? They're the large size and I just got in a box of smaller ones—"

"That would be great, thank you," Barb said. "I always feel like I'm wearing a diaper in those."

"Me, too. That's part of why I asked," Joyce said, reaching into a box near her and putting the other package on the counter. "There. That's better. Again, I'm sorry about all that. Normally, I can handle Carter

without losing my temper, but it's been so stressful and I didn't mean to be so rude."

Barb shook her head. "I don't think it—she kind of deserved it. And I think anyone would be stressed taking in someone new who just lost their parents in a fire."

"Thank you. That's very kind of you."

Barb forced a nod, taking out her money to pay and get this embarrassing errand over with as quickly as possible.

November 5

"Okay, where did she go?" Joyce asked, looking around the town. She hadn't seen her niece by the store, so she'd frantically called to Donald that she was taking a break and walked around the corner, not sure where to look. "I should have gone after her. I just—I didn't—where is she?"

"It's okay, Mrs. Byers. I don't think she went far," Barb said, and Joyce tried for a smile but couldn't manage it. She was worried about her niece. They all were, even the one that was looking at her watch like she was afraid she'd be late.

"Is that her there?" Nancy asked. "What was she doing in the police station?"

"I am going to kill him," Joyce muttered under her breath. She looked back in the direction of the store, cursing its existence and her need to be nearby, but she wasn't going to let this rest, either.

Veronica had crossed the street to them. "Okay, I surrender. Lock me away."

Nancy stared at her. Barb smiled. Joyce shook her head.

"We are not locking you away," Joyce began, "but if Hop asked you over to talk—"

"I'm fine."

"And I was going to ask if you wanted to come to my house," Barb said. "I was thinking you could stay the night if you wanted, but that's up to you and your aunt."

Veronica frowned. "Why would you invite me over? I'm the crazy person, remember?"

"Sweetheart, there's a difference between crazy and traumatized, and that's not—you are fine, and you can go with your friends if you want but I want you to call me later so I know you're still okay," Joyce said, not sure if she dared let the girl go, but if she thought Barb didn't want her and really shouldn't be alone—no, it was best this way.

She hoped.

"Come on," Barb said. "Mom's making baked ziti tonight. It's always good."

"Lots of oregano?"

"Um, yeah, actually. How did you know?"

Veronica winced. "I didn't. I... Mom used to make spaghetti with oregano. One of the few things she knew how to cook. I was being... dumb."

Joyce reached over and pulled her into a hug. "It's going to be okay. We're going to get through this. If you think you can, you can go with your friends. If not, you can always keep me company at the store."

"I'll go with Barb," Veronica said. "I... No offense, but that store is awful, and I'm sorry you work there."

Joyce didn't really love it, either, but there weren't a lot of opportunities for her in Hawkins, and she couldn't afford to lose her position. "Okay, but remember to call me."

Veronica nodded, stepping back and walking away with the other girls. Joyce watched them for a moment before realizing she was

being watched. She looked over and saw Hop and red again. She turned, marching toward him.

"I can't believe you asked her anyway," Joyce said as she got closer.

"Hold up one damned minute," Hop said, and Joyce glared at him, not willing to back down. "She came to me, not the other way around."

"What? Why would she do that?"

"To ask me what it would look like if your house was bugged."

Joyce looked back at where the girls had gone. "I don't understand. Why would she ask about that? That's crazy. Paranoid crazy. Worse than Aunt Darlene and her obsession with death."

"It's weird, Joyce, but things don't add up about that fire."

"She did not kill her parents."

"I didn't say she did, but I think she knows more than she's saying."

Joyce pinched her nose. "Look, I can't deal with this right now. I have to get back to the store. She's going to her friend's house for the night, and you are not ruining that for her. She... she had a rough day, and I don't want her to be alone or badgered, even if she is acting weird. She was in a daze, I think, those first few weeks. Now she's actually starting to cope with her grief, and it's messy. It's going to get worse before it gets better, and I don't know that I can handle it, not if she's anything like I was when they went, but you know... I have to try, and I don't need you make it worse by picking at that scab. The fire happened. There's no denying that."

"I'm not. I just... I have questions."

"You are so damned suspicious," Joyce told him. "It's not a good look for you."

"Yeah, well, did I or did I not have reason to be?"

She flinched. "Not as much as you thought until you became an

unreasonable, jealous asshole. Now leave me alone. I told you—I can't deal with this now.”

“You really don't have to do this,” Veronica said, looking around Barb's room and biting her lip. “I didn't... I was all over today, and I know... I don't think you really want me to be around, so you don't have to—”

“If I really didn't want you here, I wouldn't have asked,” Barb said. “I'm not that... I don't know that I'm as forthright as you can be, with the way you don't hold back at all, but I'm not really one to pretend I like someone when I don't.”

Veronica ran her fingers through her hair. “I don't—I was just about to ask you how you were going to manage when Nancy got with her popular jock boyfriend and started spending all her time with Carol and Nicole.”

“You do have a tendency to lash out at people,” Barb said. “I noticed. I just... I think there's more to you than that.”

“A giant mess?” Veronica suggested, because she was. She was so confused and conflicted. She wanted to believe she'd really seen him, talked to him, kissed him. She wasn't on drugs, just her usual cigarette habit, so it wasn't like she could have hallucinated him, but she had been panicking and crying and all over, so maybe they were right and she hadn't. And how did she even start to go forward when she wasn't sure what was real and what wasn't?

She shouldn't have asked the chief about the bugs, but he'd been almost kind to her, and she thought Joyce trusted him—her aunt's shaky judgment in husbands aside—and Jonathan did, and Veronica felt like Jonathan knew people rather well, if those looks he gave her were any indication. Sometimes she thought he saw right through her, through everything.

“You're more than that,” Barb said, sitting down on her bed. “And, really, find me a teenager that isn't a mess. We've got all the stress of hormones, school and popularity contests, and even when you don't want to care about that, it still affects you, and then all this pressure

about college and you just..."

"Miss the days it was about Barbies and dress up and not cliques and grades and 'what are you going to do with your life,'" Veronica finished. She almost sat down and then sighed. "I so need a cigarette. I'm sorry. I was trying not to, but I can't sit still..."

Barb pointed to the window. "If we go outside, we'll get all sorts of questions from my parents. I'm not big on the outdoors, especially at night."

Veronica's parents hadn't ever cared, and she was used to smoking in her bedroom, but she hadn't expected Barb to be okay with it. She opened it up and lit up, inhaling and enjoying the rush that the first calming breath always gave her.

"Do you mind me asking something?"

"What?"

"Why'd you start?"

Veronica looked down at her cigarette. "Back before I got all popular, I was this... outcast loser, and I saw all this stuff around showing how cool and rebellious it was, and I thought, 'that's what I want to be. Something more than this, than lame and normal.' And so I started with this and a monocle while writing in my diary—go ahead and laugh, it was kind of ridiculous—but I found myself using it more and more to cope instead of to rebel. Heather Duke had bulimia. Heather McNamara had sleeping pills. I had cigarettes."

"What did Heather Chandler have?"

"Alcohol and Remington frat boys?" Veronica shrugged. "She seemed bulletproof, you know? Nothing ever bothered her. Unless, of course, you didn't agree with her. That was not to be tolerated at all. She really didn't like that."

"And you didn't agree with her?"

"Oh, I flushed my popularity down the toilet when I puked on her shoes," Veronica said. "And I thought it was the worst thing of my

life, having her that pissed at me. I was wrong. The next night, my house burned down and my parents died. I'd take being a social outcast over that any day."

"If I lost my parents, I'd be a wreck. And I think they'd have a hard time without me. I... was the only one, you know? And not really by choice, like some people think."

"Oh, it was definitely by choice in my parents' case," Veronica said. "Sometimes I think I was just kind of the... afterthought, you know? They had the perfect suburban life, with the house and the careers and it just wasn't complete without a kid, so pop one out and done. Most of the time, they didn't know what to do with me. They loved me, but they never knew me, you know what I mean?"

"I think so. I mean, I'm super close to my parents, so it's not the same, but I see it with Nancy. Her parents have no idea what's going on with her."

"I'm not sure Nancy knows what's going on with her," Veronica muttered. She realized her cigarette had burned all the way down and snuffed it out, tossing it out the window. "I shouldn't say that, but what the hell? It's not like she likes me anyway."

"That's not true. There's a difference between being worried and not liking someone. She's genuinely scared for you," Barb said. "I think all of us are."

Veronica snorted. "I wonder sometimes if what you all really should be is afraid of me."

Hop picked up his drink and took a sip before reaching for the phone. He knew Joyce wasn't going to be happy with him—she was already pissed—but he couldn't let this go. Not when he knew he was right about those burns and Veronica's behavior was weird as hell. She was asking about bugs, for Christ's sake. And she'd come in to the police station to do it. This wasn't something he could ignore, and he was not the least bit convinced it was just about Veronica being traumatized. Something here did not add up.

The fact that he saw it through the haze of beer and pills his own grief had put him in just made that sense he had ten times stronger. He shouldn't have caught it. He wasn't fooling himself. Even if he was a former big city cop, his job had slipped away from him at the same time as his marriage, all gone in the vortex that had stolen his life after his daughter was diagnosed with cancer.

No, he had to know more. And maybe he couldn't get to the best source, but there were others out there. He could still use them.

And hell, as much as it was a damned wrong thing to say, he'd have leverage enough to force the truth if he had proof from other sources.

He lifted the phone and dialed the number he'd had Flo get for him before he left work. It rang once, then twice, and he was starting to think he wasn't going to get an answer by five, but someone finally picked up.

"Rhodes."

"Detective," Hop began. "Jim Hopper over in Hawkins. Was wondering if I could ask you a few questions about that fire that killed the Sawyers."

"Now?"

"No, next week," Hop muttered, shaking his head. "Look, it's important. I need to know about the fire sooner rather than later."

"It's a closed case. It's not going to—"

"Her aunt's asshole of an ex-husband attacked her two days ago. He was drunk, mistook her for the aunt, and held her long enough to leave marks. We've got him locked up, he'll be arraigned on Monday, but I know this guy. He's going to have his lawyer try and discredit her, and there are a lot of rumors about that damned fire. I need to know what actually happened so I can make sure he doesn't get out and go after her again."

"You sure he will?"

"He kept saying he had a right to treat his wife any way he pleased.

Guy doesn't seem to realize there was a divorce, and he hurt her in front of both his kids. Plus his car ended up catching fire, and he blames her for it. I'm sure he's going to make another attempt, if not on her then on her aunt, and he was sniffing around after the girl's inheritance before he showed his ugly face again."

"Damn," Rhodes said. "All right. I'll get what I have faxed to your office. Give me the number."

Hop did, hanging up and glad for the excuse that Lonnie'd given him. While none of what he said wasn't true—Hop was more than convinced that if Lonnie got out, he'd go after Joyce again—possibly getting Veronica by mistake again—he didn't know that he would have gotten Rhodes to give him anything if he hadn't had a pressing case with a deadline on it.

He needed that file. Now. It could not come through the fax fast enough.

13. Chapter 13

Summary for the Chapter:

Early days with Veronica continue to be awkward for everyone.

Hop tries to pursue his investigation and the night gets dangerous.

Notes for the Chapter:

And now the story catches up to when season one starts, with a few changes. I'm actually quite excited about what's to come and terrified at the same time, as I've created a complication I wasn't planning on... still, I hope it works.

October 4

“So, I hear you pissed off the town biddies again,” Karen said, and Joyce flinched. “And I have to admit, I’m a little hurt I heard it from them and not you.”

“My days have been a little busy, and I don’t have time to gossip like they do,” Joyce said, trying to hold in her frustration. She’d called the lawyer’s office five times already and been given a different excuse each time, all of them lies. She wanted to go in and demand to see him, but that meant driving to Ohio, and she didn’t have time for that, either.

She couldn’t afford it, and that was the damned problem. They needed money. Having another mouth to feed and being in between paychecks, she already felt the strain, even with Veronica barely picking at her food.

And the clothes, God, the clothes. The girl could wear Joyce’s stuff,

but she should have her own, and they were going to go through laundry soap twice as fast, and Veronica didn't seem willing to sleep without the light on, and Joyce was fretting about the electric bill already.

She knew it was stupid to get this worked up over it, but she couldn't sleep. Her mind just went over and over everything they needed until she got sick and exhaustion finally took her.

"I meant about your niece," Karen said. "It just came around in the church gossip, and I am on the one hand so sorry for you, but on the other—why didn't you say anything?"

Joyce sighed. "I didn't—it's been chaos since I found out about Marion's death. I had to arrange for time off, I went to the hospital, and it was such a nightmare for Veronica there I had to bring her home early and then we had such trouble moving her in and I've had to work..."

"Well, you are all welcome over at our house for dinner any time. Just say the day, and I'll take care of supper for the day," Karen said. "Or I'll bring over a casserole. Either way."

"Thanks, Karen."

"How is she doing? Poor thing. Her parents dying like that..." Karen shook her head. "I can't imagine it."

Joyce had in some ways lived it, but even her situation was different. In some ways, it was a relief when her mom finally stopped suffering, but at the same time, it wasn't. "She's mostly out of it because of her medication, spends most of her time in Will's old room."

"Oh, that poor thing," Karen repeated, and Joyce nodded, though the words were really irritating her. She was glad she hadn't made it to church today. That would have been torture to sit through, and she wasn't all that religious. "Well, Will is welcome with us any time you need it, and you try and take care of yourself as well as that girl and the boys, okay?"

"Of course, Karen."

"I'd better get home and get this meal ready before Ted loses control of the kids completely," Karen went on. "I left him with Holly, and who knows how much of a disaster that will be."

Joyce nodded, passing her the bag. She watched the other woman leave, glad Karen had gotten distracted away from Joyce's harsh words to Mrs. Carter last night. She would have to look into getting Veronica in school, but right now the girl was in no shape for that, and it was just another thing to worry about for later.

She picked up the number for the lawyer again. Time to make another call.

Will hadn't realized the dog was going to be a problem. Most of the time, he was outside, and it wasn't a big deal if he was in the house or not. His mom would complain if the dog made a big mess of things when he was inside, but as long as he or Jonathan cleaned it up, having him inside was never a problem before.

He let him in after school to feed him like he always did, following him inside to get the food dish, and it was always fine every other day.

Except today, Veronica was in the kitchen, and she must have looked and smelled enough like his mom—she was wearing her clothes again—to fool the dog, who greeted her like he would their mom, enthusiastic with the jumping up and licking and Veronica screamed like she was being murdered.

Will ran over to grab the dog and get him off of her, but she still climbed up on to the counter and huddled against the cupboards, screaming and crying.

Jonathan ran into the room. "What happened?"

"The dog," Will said. "He just... he was being friendly. Thought she was Mom, I think."

"Damn it," Jonathan muttered, going over to Veronica's side. He stopped, looking back at Will. "Take him back outside. Come on,

Will. Think. She's terrified.”

“Yeah, but he always eats inside, and it didn't happen yesterday,” Will said, taking the dog by the collar and tugging him toward the door.

“Yesterday she didn't leave her room,” Jonathan said. He turned back to Veronica. “It's okay. He won't jump on you again. You can come down. You... did you ever have a dog before?”

She shook her head, accepting his help down and lifting up her shirt, peering at her side. Will winced when he saw the claw marks there right next to a torn bandage and a bunch of really gross skin that made him want to puke.

Jonathan sighed. “Come on. We've got some more bandages in the bathroom and we can clean up the scratches, too. Mom said your medication's in there, only if you want it, since I know it makes you sick to your stomach.”

Veronica nodded, walking away from him and down the hall.

Jonathan looked back at Will. “Why are both of you still in here?”

“I...” Will didn't know what to say. He'd been caught up in looking at his cousin, that gross part of her skin, something he'd never seen before. His mom had said she was burned, and her parents died in a fire and supposedly she was there, so that made sense, but it didn't seem real before. Veronica was just a weirdo who stared into space and screamed at the slightest thing.

And the dog, now, too.

“Take him outside. From now on, he's an outdoor only dog.” Jonathan said. Will started to protest, but he shook his head. “At least for now. We can bring them back together, get her used to him, and she's probably not really afraid of dogs, just spooked by him coming in all of a sudden like this.”

Will nodded, taking the dog back outside.

It wasn't fair, but nothing about his cousin being here was fair.

November 6

Hop had been up all night with the faxed file.

The photos were crap, and he was going to have to talk to Flo about getting a much better fax machine installed in the office because files like this one needed to come in where he could actually really see them.

Still, he'd been over them as many times as he could. He lifted up the one with the house in flames again, shaking his head. The whole damned thing was in flames, so how the hell had Veronica survived that? Neighbors said they found her wandering the street, confused and lost, shaking and injured, though she was blocks from her house and no one knew how she'd gotten there.

He read over the interviews with the witnesses. All of them spoke about her rambling, but none of them said what she said, just that it made no sense.

He gathered up the photos and stuck them back in the file, getting out of the truck and walking up to the store. Joyce was already pissed at him, and he didn't know that this was going to make it any better, but he had to talk to her anyway.

She looked up as he walked into the store, giving him her patented *go the hell* away look. He knew that one well.

"Can you take a break? I need to talk to you."

"You're about to piss me off again, aren't you?" she asked, folding her arms over her chest. "We really shouldn't do this here."

"I'm willing to take it someplace more private, but I still need to talk to you. I got the file on the fire that killed your sister and her husband."

She put a hand to her head. "Hop, why are you doing this? They said it was a gas main. They closed it, and I don't know why the insurance

still hasn't come through or why that lawyer is being a complete asshole, but I cannot—”

He put the photo of the house burning on the counter. “Tell me this looks like a normal fire to you. Tell me that happened from a gas main.”

She picked it up and frowned. “It's on fire all over. Why is that so hard to believe?”

“Because nothing exploded, Joyce. The structure is intact. That house is the only one that's on fire. And do you see anywhere she could have gotten out? Because I don't.”

Joyce put a hand to her head. “Hop, this is—”

“She was found blocks away, muttering to herself,” he went on. “None of these interviews say anything about what she actually said. She's got burns that don't fit with the fire. The fire doesn't fit with the fire, and she's asking me about bugs in your house. Something is going on here.”

“And you want my permission to talk to her, is that it?”

“I don't—”

“Don't say you don't need it. Legally, she's a minor, and a guardian is supposed to be there. And she's at a friend's house, and you are not going over there to embarrass her and ruin her morning.”

Hop studied her. “Joyce, has she ever said anything about the fire that gave you reason for concern? Things that didn't make sense or that worried you? Don't hold back. You're not protecting her if you do. She could be in real trouble.”

“She is not crazy, Hop.”

He reached out and touched her shoulder. “What if something happened in that fire, something she's been too scared or confused to tell you about?”

Joyce started to shake her head, but he could see he'd touched a

nerve. Something was there. She knew something, something she didn't want to think about.

"Tell me. Whatever it is, just tell me."

Joyce swallowed. "There may have been a boyfriend."

"You think he was involved?"

"Veronica said he wasn't, but she also said her parents didn't want her seeing him and he had a reputation as a troublemaker but was sweet to her."

"Jesus."

Joyce grimaced. "It sounded familiar to me, too, but she said she hadn't seen him, and he hasn't been around the house. I don't—she's rarely alone. The boys would know. Jonathan would know, and he watches over her like he watches over Will. He'd know, and he'd tell me."

Hop thought back to his conversation with the kid that day with Lonnie. He'd been protective of all of them, but there was something else. He'd said he'd felt like someone was watching them at the school. And Hop had thought he saw someone, too.

Maybe there was a boyfriend. And maybe that same boyfriend set the fire.

"You may wish to postpone tonight's test," Dyer said, and Brenner looked up from his files, frowning. She was getting more and more irritating of late, with her nay-saying of every experiment and how he handled the situation with Nine. This had been her plan, and yet somehow he was to blame for it not having any results.

"And why, pray tell, would I do that?" Brenner asked, closing the file. "You know how important this is."

"I'm aware, and I'm also aware you have invited others in to observe it," she said. "You know how I feel about that."

"You've made your disapproval known, quite vocally, as I recall."

"It was your insistence on that sideshow with Nine that led us to where we are now," Dyer reminded him. "You wanted him to test his limits, make a larger fire than he ever had before, and he did. Then he killed half the staff and disappeared. This is history repeating itself."

"Eleven is different. She's not a pyrokinetic. She has already proven that her abilities go far beyond the others, and she is on the verge of a potential breakthrough unlike anything we've ever seen before."

"That is what you said about Nine," Dyer snapped. "And now Nine is free and causing destruction across the country. We can't contain him, and that Sawyer fire is now a real problem. The chief of police is suspicious."

Brenner looked at her. "Are you joking? You're the one who said all along that you could handle that man at any time. Now you think he's a real threat?"

"He's already seen the file from Sherwood. They faxed it to him. The girl spoke to him. He could be close to something."

"And you said he was a drunken addict and easily dealt with," Brenner reminded her. "And using the girl as bait, leaving her alive, that was also your idea. You are responsible for this mess. Go and clean it up."

"Nine was your failure, whether you admit that to yourself or not. You lost control of him, and it will cost us the entire project."

Brenner looked right at her. "Discrediting both of them should be easy. Tonight's experiment is too important to cancel, and if those same extra guests we have find out that I did cancel it, they'll want to know why. If I have to tell them that it's because Nine slipped through our fingers, then we will lose the project. Is that what you want? Because I can go arrange it right now."

"You know it's not what I want."

"Then deal with the girl and the cop," Brenner said. "Keep it quiet for

tonight, at least, and then if you want... spring the trap on Nine. Use the girl. She's proven herself unstable enough so far, and while it's regrettable that a line with such potential is about to go to waste, if it gets us Nine back or eliminated, it will be worth it."

"Tonight had better be worth it," she said, and he nodded, already certain that it would be.

"Tell me about the boyfriend," Hop said. "Everything you know."

Joyce sighed, shaking her head as she did. She didn't know much of anything about the boyfriend. Yesterday had been the first time Veronica had mentioned anything like one, and Joyce hadn't really been able to talk to her about it, not when she was stuck working and then she'd sent her off with Barb for the night.

She'd called when she got home, just to check on Veronica, but the conversation had been strained, and it wasn't like she wanted to discuss a phantom boyfriend and possibly dangerous makeout sessions over the phone.

"I don't know much of anything," Joyce admitted. "Yesterday when she came back from the mall, Veronica said she'd lost her friends because she panicked in the changing room, couldn't breathe, started crying over smoothies, and actually made out with a boy in the mall bathroom."

Hop frowned. "And you let her go to her friend's after that?"

"I didn't want her home by herself, Jonathan was working late, Will was at the Wheeler's, and I had to close," Joyce said. "And Barb has been so sweet to her. They bought her new clothes and were so worried about her... I was going to pick her up when I got off work, but they asked if she could stay, and I didn't have the heart to make her leave."

"Do they know more about this boyfriend? Or the boy she made out with?"

"That he may have had a hamster and the boy she made out with

reminded her of him and took advantage of her vulnerability,” Joyce said, feeling like a failure again. She hadn't been there, hadn't stopped it, hadn't helped. She'd let Veronica go with friends instead, and what did that say about her as a guardian?

“Could it have been that same boy?”

“Hop, I wasn't there. I don't know. You'd have to ask her, and you are not asking her while she's still at Barb's. This can wait until tomorrow.”

“She asked me about bugs, Joyce. Listening devices in your house.”

“You said that, and I don't know why she would.”

“Could this boyfriend be stalking her?”

Joyce sighed. “I told you—I haven't seen any sign of it. None of us have. Not Will, who is always quick to point out when something is 'weird' with Veronica like it would make me force her to leave, not Jonathan, who watches over all of us, and not me.”

“Someone caused those burns, Joyce. It might have been that boyfriend. If he's watching her, none of you are safe.”

Joyce felt sick. “You had better be wrong about that. You have to be. We... no. There can't be some stalker sitting outside my house. That's just not—Please tell me you're wrong. You're paranoid. None of this actually happened. You don't really think my sister was murdered, do you?”

“I think there's too much here that doesn't add up, and I want answers,” Hop told her. “All I need is a straight story from your niece.”

Joyce sighed, putting her hand to her head. “Okay. Okay. I'll just... I'll call the Hollands and see if they can bring Veronica here for you to talk to her.”

She turned back to the phone, picking it up when she remembered that she didn't know the Hollands' number off the top of her head. She hung it back up, looking for the phone book.

The bell clanged, and she looked over to see one of the other officers coming in.

“Chief, there you are. Flo's been trying to get you on the radio. We were about to drive out without you, but saw your truck, so...”

“So?” Hop asked, looking at him with a frown.

“Apparently there's some kind of disturbance out on the east side of town. Looks like kids stole Phil Larson's garden gnomes and put them in the road. We've got at least one accident so far.”

“Damn it,” Hop said, and while Joyce figured he'd like to tell them to deal with it themselves, it was about the biggest thing to happen in Hawkins in years, and he couldn't talk to Veronica right now anyway.

“I'll let you know when we're both home,” Joyce said. “You can talk to Veronica then.”

“It'll be late.”

“It'll be fine,” Joyce told him. If there was a stalker, they needed to know, and she didn't care how late it ended up being when they had a chance to sort it all out. She needed to be sure her kids were safe, all of them.

That was worth any late night.

“Everything looks pretty dark,” Barb said, stopping her car in front of the house. She frowned. “Are you sure you want me to leave you here?”

“It's fine. I don't mind being by myself,” Veronica said, reaching for the door handle. “Thank you. For everything. I... I almost felt normal for a change, and I don't... I... Thank you.”

Barb smiled. “Any time. See you at school tomorrow. And... you can call me if you need to. I'll be up for a bit yet, and if I don't answer or the line's busy, it might be because Nancy called, but you can call back. I mean it. Just let me know if there's anything you need.”

Veronica forced a smile. "I'm fine, really, but thanks."

She grabbed the shopping bags and carried them up to the house with her. She should actually do laundry, since her new outfits only came to four and she wanted to wear the clothes that were her and not her aunt tomorrow.

She walked into the house, waving at Barb, and the other girl backed out of the driveway. She heard the phone and ignored it. Jonathan wasn't here, his car was missing, and neither was her aunt, so there was no point as the phone was never for her.

She walked down the hall and put the bags on her bed, grimacing at the empty room again.

She didn't want to stay in here. She should have stayed with Barb, but she was so over having a babysitter. She didn't want one, even if she was borderline crazy.

She walked out onto the porch, lighting up a cigarette. She sat down on the swing, blowing it out. She wished she could see him again, her pyro, that if he really was alive he could give her some kind of sign. Just even a small thing, like the lit end of a cigarette would be enough. She'd spent the last night looking out Barb's window for one, hoping that maybe he'd come for her there.

Why would they watch Barb, right? It should be safe enough there.

Only he never came, and she couldn't keep pretending she was okay any longer, so she'd said she should come back here.

She leaned back and closed her eyes, swinging back and forth and humming to herself. She missed him already, though she supposed if she was honest, she missed her sanity the most. She hated being so unsure of what was and wasn't real. If he would show himself again, she'd know.

Only they were watching here, so he wouldn't.

She heard a car crunching the gravel of the driveway and looked over, expecting Jonathan, but she didn't know that car.

Black. Lincoln or Ford or something.

Wait, why was that familiar?

The driver stopped, opening the car door, and a man got out, giving her a thin smile. "Are you Mrs. Byers?"

"A bit late for a sales call," she said as she rose, going to the edge of the porch near the steps. "And no, that's my aunt and she's not here. You're not a local, are you?"

"Not exactly," he said, and she heard something snap. She looked around for the cause of the noise, but she didn't see anything. When she turned back, he was a lot closer to her, and the passenger side door was open.

Veronica stared in disbelief. The social worker. The nurse. That bitch. What was she doing here? She'd wanted some sign she wasn't crazy, but not this. Not this.

"We need to have a little talk," the woman said. "It would seem you've become very confused about the fire that killed your parents."

"Get away from me," Veronica said, trying to run back into the house, but the man caught her first, covering her mouth as she screamed. The woman walked up to them as she fought him, taking out a syringe as she did. Veronica fought harder against his hold, needing to free herself before that woman got close.

The needle went in her arm, and everything went fuzzy, like it had the night of the fire.

"Get her inside."

"It was a seven," Will admitted of the roll, knowing the others would think he was stupid for telling Mike what it had landed on. They could go on like the roll never happened and win the campaign. That was what Lucas and Dustin wanted.

Only his brother had raised him to be honest, unlike his dad, who never kept his word about anything. Ever.

"Huh?" Mike asked, frowning.

"The roll, it was a seven," Will explained. "The Demogorgon, it got me."

Mike just kept staring at him like he didn't believe Will had said that. He shrugged and pushed his bike forward. "See you tomorrow."

He caught up with the others and biked along with Lucas and Dustin until Lucas' turn off. "Good night, ladies."

"Kiss your mom 'night for me," Dustin called back, getting the finger from Lucas. He turned to Will with a smile. "Race you back to my place? Winner gets a comic."

Will grinned. He'd had his eye on one for a while, but he knew he'd never be able to afford it, ever, so he was so going to win this race. "Any comic?"

"Yeah."

Will took off, speeding down the hill and leaving Dustin behind, his lead secure, since he had to get that comic.

"Hey," Dustin protested. "I didn't say 'go.' Get back here! I'm gonna kill you!"

Will just laughed, smiling back over his shoulder. "I'll take your X-Men 134!"

He reached Mirkwood, knowing he was getting closer to home. He couldn't stop smiling. He'd won, and now he'd have a great comic for his own. His bike light flickered, and that made him frown. He looked down and then almost missed the shadow standing in front of him.

He jerked the bike to the side, tumbling down into the forest. He groaned, getting up. The bike didn't seem broken, and he was okay, but that still sucked. And what was that noise? That didn't sound like a person.

The shadow came toward him and he bolted, running through the

trees toward his house. He ran all the way up and into the house, locking the back door behind him. He stumbled through the kitchen, bumping the wall when he saw the shadow at the door.

“Mom? Jonathan? Mom?” he called out, seeing the shadow at the door. He ran down the hall, checking each room. “Veronica?”

He stopped in the doorway, frowning as he went closer to the bed. Had that shadow thing already killed his cousin? She wasn't moving, and why hadn't she heard him? He reached out and shook her shoulder. “Veronica? Veronica, wake up. There's someone—something—out there.”

She moaned, barely lifting her head, blinking at him. “Wh... what?”

“Come on. There's something—” Will stopped, looking back as he heard the door slam against the wall. That thing was inside the house. “Veronica, get up. There's someone here.”

“I know... they... stuck a needle in me... told me I'm crazy...”

“You are, because it's here and it's going to get us, and you're not moving,” he said, yanking on her arm. “Come on. Get up. Now. Please. Don't let that thing get us.”

She started to sit up just as it came in the doorway. “The window... Will...”

He nodded, climbing up on the bed when it grabbed hold of him and he could only scream.

The roll was a seven.

The Demogorgon got him.

14. Chapter 14

Summary for the Chapter:

A busy night at the Byers house, both in Hawkins and the Upside Down.

Notes for the Chapter:

I was so excited to get to this part. And, like usual, I reached it only to find my skills so inadequate to what I wanted it to be and had pictured, and the stuff leading up to it changed things, too, so it's kind of a mash up of what I originally planned, what I had to do, and what I couldn't quite manage.

And the site first ate and then double posted the chapter, so... sorry for any confusion that may have caused, even though it wasn't really my fault.

October 5

“How are you feeling today, sweetheart?” Joyce asked, setting a glass of juice down in front of Veronica. She'd forced herself up early to have this conversation before she left for work, knowing she needed to have an idea of how soon Veronica would want or be willing to go back to school. Not because of Mrs. Carter but because she was worried about the girl here on her own, alone and miserable, in pain and grieving.

She knew people needed time alone for that, too, but that room was so empty and it couldn't be helping any for Veronica to spend all her time there. And the thing with the dog... She was still kicking herself for not thinking of it and warning Will to change their routine.

“Can I spend the night at Mike's if his mom says it's okay?” Will asked, walking in and grabbing a piece of toast off the plate next to

Veronica, who jerked away from him.

“Will, it's a school night.”

“So? They have room for me.”

Joyce winced. “I do not want to fight with you about this right now, Will. We are going to get a place with space for everyone as soon as we can. We just need to give the lawyers some time to work out those details. The answer is no.”

“Fine,” Will muttered, his annoyance clear in his voice as he left, letting the door slam behind him and startling Veronica again.

“Sorry,” Joyce told her. “He's still adjusting. We all are. I... I wanted to see what you were thinking about school and what you might want to do about that.”

“Burn it?” Veronica said, and Joyce fought against laughter. “Sorry. Inappropriate.”

“I suppose so, but it's nice to see you still have a bit of a sense of humor.”

Veronica shrugged, going back to silence, not even eating anything.

“Look, just think about it. The school here is... well, it's not that great, but what school is? I know you're smart, and your parents had a college fund for you if you wanted to go. You can decide that later. Are you still feeling sick from your medicine?”

Veronica shook her head.

Joyce sighed. “Okay, well, if you need anything, just let me know. The number for the store is taped next to the phone, and you can call me there. If there's somewhere you need to go later, Jonathan can take you once he's back from school. Right, Jonathan?”

“Mom, I was supposed to work today,” he said, and she frowned. “Will's got A/V club, and they always end up over at Mike's anyway. It's never been a problem before.”

“I don't—”

“Nowhere to go,” Veronica said, rising and leaving the table. Joyce watched her go, fretting. She didn't know what to do, how to help.

“I'll put this stuff away,” Jonathan said, gesturing to the table. “You'd better go. You're going to be late if you don't.”

“Any change?” Brenner asked, coming up behind Connie as she studied the reports from the Byers house. She did not know if she really thought Nine would make a move so soon, but she wanted to know what was happening there all the same. She needed to be ready if there was any sign that Nine had made contact.

“Silence so far, but it would seem the people you tasked with the house did not properly account for the layout, as we have nothing in the room the girl actually occupies,” Connie said, shaking her head. She didn't know what they were thinking—how hard was it to make sure every room was covered? Yes, the mundane things of the household would bore any surveillance team, and there was the potential to hear more than one might want from the teenage boy, but with the two boys sharing a room that was less likely. The shared areas of the house were covered, of course, but as the girl now spent most of her time in her room, the oversight was irritating at best.

“That can be changed.”

“Yes, but not with her in the house constantly.”

“She's school age, isn't she?” Brenner asked. “They'll have to enroll her in the local high school soon enough. We can make a move then.”

“I'd prefer it if we had live cameras. Nine's not stupid. He knew we were listening back at the house.”

“Yes, I did notice that when I reviewed what little you had. He kept the music going loud enough to interfere for the first part of your surveillance and then recognized that you knew he was there shortly before you stormed the house.”

She nodded. She'd been sure the boy was there when she heard the

stereo going, but it took a conversation with the girl's parents to reveal it. They were unfortunate casualties, as she felt sure they'd accepted the cover story and would have gone along with it. The daughter was a difficult case, but so far the drugs and manipulation were working.

"Tell me," she said. "Did you find what you were looking for in those genetic tests?"

He smiled. "What is it you think I'm looking for?"

"With your mind, sometimes I'm afraid to find out," she said, watching him carefully. "Yet Hawkins was chosen for a reason, not just because this energy plant was an easy excuse and cover. The location matters as well."

"It does."

"And you found something in this native bloodline, didn't you?"

"Potential. The sort I wish I'd known about when either of the Byers children or the Sawyer girl was younger."

Connie nodded. That made sense. He was always looking for potential. "The mother, too?"

"It seems to have passed directly through her to all her offspring," Brenner said, looking at the monitors. "Let me know if there is any sign of Nine."

Connie bristled. "You know I would have. Why are you repeating yourself?"

"Because I have to wonder if he'll see the Byers as threats or not," Brenner said, "and as there's still potential there, I'd rather not risk them just yet. I would also like to see if that potential can be increased. It should help with your efforts to contain the girl."

"You want to put a psychotropic into their home?"

"It is a possibility."

"It's a risk," Connie said. She saw him on the verge of ordering her to do it. "If the girl talks, it may be necessary. And we have only begun to monitor that situation. Let's see what happens and reassess that idea later, after we know more."

November 6

Jonathan walked into the house, rubbing his neck. His shift had been long and tiring, and he almost regretted agreeing to take it when Eric asked, but he needed the money for his car and a lot of other things around the house, so he couldn't afford to say no, either. Besides, it was a rare opportunity, both Veronica and Will out of the house for most of the shift and while his mom didn't like it when he worked when she was working and no one watched Will, with him at the Wheeler's, it was safe enough.

Of course, Will was supposed to come back and so was Veronica, and they could be here, but Veronica almost seemed up to taking care of herself, so maybe it wasn't that bad that he'd been gone an extra hour past what he'd planned on.

He walked down the hall, planning on showering before dropping into bed. He looked around his room, frowning. Will wasn't in here. Okay, maybe he was late coming back from the Wheelers.

He turned back and went over to the other bedroom. "Damn, Veronica, it's freezing in here. Why is your window open?"

She didn't move, and he shook his head, not sure what was going on with her as she had to be cold. He went over and closed the window before going back and pulling the blanket up over her on the bed. She jerked when he brushed her shoulder with it.

"Don't—what—Jonathan?"

"Relax. It's just me. I was closing your window. It's cold, and you'd freeze in the night."

She bit her lip, forcing herself up and looking around. "I... There's no

one else here, is there? No black car in the driveway, no man without a face, no Will?"

"No one else is here," Jonathan told her, confused. "Was Will here? He's not here now."

She put a hand to her head, wincing. "I... I don't know. I... It'll sound crazy if I say it out loud."

Jonathan sat down next to her, well aware of how many people liked to say his mom was crazy when she wasn't and now Veronica, too, after the fire. "It's not crazy."

She snorted. "I was sitting on the porch, people pulled up in a black car, drugged me, and when I woke up there was a monster after Will."

"I think you had a bad dream."

She sighed, lowering her head. "I... yeah. It has to be... I just... It was... It seemed... real..."

"They do," he said, "and you have more reason to have nightmares than most people. Don't think you have to stop just because someone says so or thinks you should be over it. You're over this stuff when you're over it. Sometimes you're never over it."

She twisted her lip. "You mean your dad, don't you?"

He nodded. "Yeah. He... Things were never great between them, even when I was little, and Will coming only made it worse. Even when we didn't see what was going on, the shouting and loud noises, it was bad enough."

She wrapped her arms around herself. "Did he hurt you or Will?"

Jonathan frowned. He really didn't want to talk about that. "I'm sorry he touched you, that I couldn't get him off. He was stupid and drunk, but Hopper says he's staying in jail this time."

She nodded.

“Look, I was about to get in the shower and then I was going to sleep. I'm sorry I woke you. I just didn't want you freezing overnight.”

“It's—I—can you check the house first? Make sure there's... no one here? I don't... I can't... I swear it was... It was real. They were here and they drugged me again and... and Will was here and so scared and... that thing...”

“I'll check the rest of the house. You just go back to sleep, okay?”

“Okay.”

Joyce pulled up to the house, completely exhausted. For no reason she could tell, there was a rush right at the end of her shift, and she'd been swamped right up until closing, actually forced to shut the doors fifteen minutes late, which put her at almost an hour late getting home when everything was said and done with the end of day count and the clean up she had to do each night before leaving.

She just wanted her bed, but she knew that wasn't going to happen right away. She still had to talk to Veronica and Hop should be over soon enough.

She hoped that accident wasn't too bad. No one deserved to die because of a prank like that.

She glanced at the phone, considering calling him when she stopped, staring into the kitchen.

“Veronica?”

Her niece jerked, knocking ash from her cigarette onto the floor and wincing. “Um... I couldn't sleep. I'm sorry. I... I thought with Jonathan here, I'd be better, but I'm not. I... he... it... I'm going crazy. I really am. It was real. I swear it was real.”

Joyce frowned, walking over to her and sitting down next to her. “What do you mean, it was real?”

“I thought... I was sitting on the porch, smoking, and this car came, and a man got out and he said he was looking for you but then she

got out... that social worker who pretended she was my nurse and she wasn't... she's not either of those things... and she's... she was there and she drugged me... and then Will woke me and there was a monster in the house and... I don't understand... It took him. I remember it took him... and I screamed but it didn't take me... it... it was just gone. They were gone... and I... I can't remember anything else until Jonathan got home and woke me... and... there was no one here... I'm just crazy."

"Sweetheart, none of us think you're crazy."

"Hopper does. I asked him about... he thinks I killed my parents. I didn't kill my parents. They... they let me do just about anything I wanted, they gave me almost as much money as I wanted... they didn't... I wasn't..."

Joyce pulled Veronica into her arms, not sure she wanted to mention Hop's new theory that the boyfriend had done it. "You have been under a lot of stress, and you're still grieving. I know that this isn't easy for you, and yesterday was hard. Really hard, even though it was something that should have been nice and fun."

"I hate this. I hate not knowing what's real. I hate thinking I'm just insane... I am... Why didn't I just die with them? I mean... it would have been simpler... it... it almost happened... it should have..."

"Don't say that," Joyce told her. "You did not deserve to die. Your parents didn't deserve to die. It was not supposed to happen."

"It was my fault."

Joyce winced. She sat back, lifting Veronica's chin. "Did your boyfriend do this?"

"What?"

"You said it was your fault, that they didn't want you seeing him. Could he have set the fire because he was mad at them?"

"He didn't kill them. Joyce, I know it sounds like he was some kind of—he sounds like your ex, right? Like... I saw the look, okay? I'm not stupid, just... psychotic. I just... he wanted me to take his hamster."

That was it. He wanted me to give the hamster a home because he was always having to move and... and it was innocent... it was over a damned hamster..." Veronica rose and started pacing. "I don't understand how everything got so... out of control. Everything's so confused. I don't... Sometimes I think I imagined him, too. That he... he was never real, that lost little boy with his hamster and his damage and desperation... I don't... I hate this. I hate it."

Grief did funny things to the mind, Joyce knew that. "Look, you're going to get through this. We're all going to get through this. It's just hard right now. We don't have the resources and Hawkins... it's not the kind of place for a fresh start. If I could get us all out of here, I would. This will get better. I know it's hard to believe, but I... you know I lost my parents when I wasn't much older than you. First Mom, then Dad, and it was hard. I did some... stupid things when I was grieving, and most people think I'm crazy, too. So you are not alone. We're here for you. All of us, even Will, though he thinks he's not. He's a little lost now, too."

"I didn't mean to take his room."

"I know, and you can't blame yourself for that, either. I always wanted a bigger place, and it's hard, sometimes, looking at the rooms that used to be mine and your mom's and thinking of the past, feeling trapped... I made good memories here, ones that didn't involve the people I lost or was furious with, and I have my boys, and I don't regret them at all. We can make good memories here. We can, and we will. And things will get better."

Veronica nodded. "I... I was going to get a job... I told you that... but... I thought people attacked me tonight and a monster took Will, and I'm... I don't... I am still so... wrong."

"You don't have to force yourself to work yet," Joyce told her. "We'll see about that when you're feeling better, and frankly... if the lawyers weren't dicking us around, you wouldn't have to. Your parents made sure you were very well provided for."

Veronica grimaced. "I really don't deserve that."

Joyce almost said something to that, but someone pounded on the

door, and she grimaced. "That's Hop. He had some questions for you."

"Not again. I didn't kill my parents."

"I know. Just... let him ask what he needs to ask and that will be the end of it, okay?" Joyce said, going to answer the door.

"Hey," Joyce said as she opened the door for him. "The accident wasn't bad, was it?"

He shook his head, taking off his hat as he stepped inside the house. She shut the door behind him, and Hop followed her toward the kitchen. "Just the one car running off into the ditch. Could have been a hell of a lot worse. Not sure whose brilliant idea it was, but that woman sure was pissed. She threatened to sue my entire department. Had a hell of a time talking her down, and her jerk kid didn't help much. I almost thought he was a part of it."

"Which kid? Not one of Will's friends or—"

"Think she called him Troy."

"Oh," Joyce said, and he looked at her. "Troy is one of the boys that bullies Will at school. He tried not to tell me about it, but Jonathan saw it happen when he had to pick Will up one day. I tried to talk to the principal about it, but of course I'm hysterical and boys will be boys."

"Idiots," Hop muttered just as Veronica called them assholes. He raised a brow to Joyce, who shook her head, reaching for a cigarette and frowning.

"This isn't my brand."

"They showed up in my locker," Veronica said. "I don't know who put them there."

"Your boyfriend?"

"I don't have a boyfriend," she said, lighting up another one and

blowing the smoke into Hop's face. "My parents died. I moved to this shitty little town, and no one I knew from back there bothers to call here, so fuck it."

Joyce flinched. "Veronica—"

"Sorry," she said, pacing the room. "I just... it... I know I screwed up my friendship with Heather Chandler, and I ruined things with Betty, but... I didn't... I didn't realize how much it would hurt that they... that none of them bothered to call even when my parents died."

Christ. Hop sat down. "Sounds like you need a better class of friends."

"Well, Betty was a good friend, but I abandoned her to be a popular bimbo. Heather wasn't much of a friend, more of a bully, but sometimes I wanted to believe we had something more than the fake high school bullshit we pretended at," Veronica said. She rubbed her head. "I don't feel good. No. The drugs weren't real... they can't be making me sick again..."

"You're getting pretty worked up," Joyce said. "And how many of those have you had tonight?"

Veronica looked down at the cigarette. "I... I don't know. I lost track... I don't know if the one was part of that... dream or whatever it was..."

"Dream?"

"People broke into the house, grabbed me, drugged me... and then a monster took Will... and I don't know why it left me behind. I always survive when I shouldn't and—" She broke off and ran to the sink, puking.

Joyce walked over, taking the cigarette from her and putting it in the ashtray. She got out a rag and wet it down, wiping the girl's face for her. Veronica sat down on the floor.

"I feel like I took the drugs again," Veronica whispered. "I didn't. I hate them. I didn't take them, but I didn't... it's not real. None of it is."

Joyce sat down next to her and pulled her into her arms, holding her and rocking her gently. “Shh. It's all right. You're okay. You just had a bad night, that's all.”

Hop frowned. “People were in the house?”

“I... No. They got me when I was on the porch, but I woke up in my bedroom... so... yes?” Veronica sounded very confused. “I... I saw the nurse from the hospital... she was evil... I hated her... but it couldn't have been her... I don't... I'm sorry. I'm just crazy. It must have been a nightmare like Jonathan said.”

“And Will? You said a monster took him.”

Veronica snorted. “Yeah, and I'm obviously psycho, okay?”

Hop was starting to believe that, but he had to be sure, and even as damaged as she was, he still didn't know that he believed she was the one who'd killed her parents, not the one who'd burned those marks into her own skin. “Where is Will?”

“He must still be at the Wheeler's,” Joyce said. “He stays over there as often as he can, and he was there last night and today and... and they were playing Dungeons and Dragons or whatever it is, and he would have—there are monsters in it. Dragons. Other things. Veronica, did he call and tell you he wasn't coming home because of the game?”

“I don't remember the phone,” Veronica said. “Barb dropped me off, said to call her if I needed anything because the house was dark... your cars were gone... I... I went to the porch to smoke, they showed up in a black car... Nothing past her dropping me off makes sense.”

“I think you need to get some rest,” Joyce said, rising. “Come on. Let's get you off the floor.”

Veronica didn't fight her, letting her help her up and then down the hall. Hop watched them, still frowning. The girl was right—it didn't make sense, someone showing up and drugging her, but something had gone on tonight just like it had the night of the fire. Whether that was her taking her medication and getting so high she couldn't tell

what was what or something more, he didn't know. He just knew Joyce wasn't going to let him ask her more about the fire now.

He caught her coming out of the room, shutting the door behind her.

“Does she keep the medication in her room?”

Joyce shook her head. “No. It's been in the bathroom since she came here. She never needed any of it refilled.”

He nodded, going into the bathroom and opening the cupboard. He took down the bottle and opened it, looking inside. The thing was nearly full. He set it on the counter and checked the other one. Same. He'd have to count them, but he'd bet she took maybe two of the pills out of either bottle, four tops.

“She supposed to be on this all the time?”

“Um... one was for the pain, and the other was to make sure the burns didn't develop any infection, but she said it made her nauseous, so she stopped taking them a few days in. She never complained about the pain, only the nausea.”

“Tough kid.”

Joyce nodded. “Yeah, but not so tough as you think, Hop. She didn't do anything to her parents.”

“I don't think she did, but it's still a possibility that her boyfriend did.”

“And, what, her boyfriend brought men in a black car here to torment her?” Joyce asked, folding her arms over her chest. “I don't know, Hop. That's a stretch and then some, and I'm the one who's crazy, remember?”

He shook his head. “You are not crazy.”

He was starting to feel like he was, with the way this thing kept shifting on him. Something was going on here, and he couldn't get the truth of it. Every time he thought he knew, it changed on him again, and he still didn't know what the hell happened.

He took a pill from each bottle and put it in his pocket, aware of Joyce watching him. "I just want to make sure these are what the bottles say they are. And I'm going to take one of those cigarettes that she 'found' in her locker and test them, too. If they really did just appear there—"

"The boyfriend again?"

"Hey, it's still possible. And this stuff still doesn't add up."

"All right, fine," Joyce said. "Test them. Let me know what you find out."

Will woke up with a gasp, gagging on something in his throat. He turned over and coughed, his hands touching something sick and gooey, making him want to puke even more than before. He sat back and looked at the room in confusion. This was his room—his old room—and Veronica's bed was in it, but she wasn't there. It was covered over with vines, the same creepy vines that ran all over the place. It looked like something had died here, like everything had died.

He swallowed. "Veronica?"

She didn't answer, and he wondered if she was dead. Had that thing gotten her, too? Was she here somewhere? Was she somewhere else? Where else? Where was this place?

Was he... dead?

He didn't think so. He couldn't be. He was still thinking, right? And this was not at all like what they said heaven was or even hell. Hell was supposed to be hot and fiery, and this place was cold and dark. It did seem like death, though, death everywhere.

He forced himself up and looked around again, trying to make sense of this place. It looked like home, like his old bedroom, but not like his old bedroom, and he could see out in the hall was like more of their house, just covered in the vines and dark in a way that wasn't like it was at night but still dark. He wasn't sure how to describe it.

He didn't like this place. It scared him.

And then he heard it. That thing. He knew the sound it made, and it was coming. He ran toward the window, climbing up on the bed and trying not to react to touching the vines. They felt gross under his hands, making him sick all over again, but he couldn't worry about that now.

He yanked on the window, trying to get it to open, but it wouldn't budge because of the vines. He almost screamed, panicking. He had to get out of here before that thing found him again. He didn't know why he wasn't dead, but he would be if that thing got him now.

He laid down on the bed, trying not to think about the vines, and used both his feet to kick the glass out of the window. He scrambled up and forced himself out through the gap, falling into the yard. He looked up and saw the yard was like the house, everything dead, and stuff seemed to be floating in the air.

“Ow. Fuck.”

Will whirled around, staring at the person on the ground behind him. He didn't seem to be covered in goo like Will was, and for a minute he wondered if that was the thing that took him, but that thing didn't have a face.

This one did.

“Who are you?”

The guy's head jerked up, and Will realized he was younger than he thought, more like Jonathan's age, not an adult. “You... can see me?”

“Yeah. I can see you.”

“No one's ever seen me before,” the kid said, and Will wondered what the hell he meant by that because it made no sense. “Not in the firewalk.”

“What?” Will shook his head. No, that wasn't important. At least, he didn't think it was. “Where are we? What is this place?”

The boy in the coat dragged himself up to his feet. "I don't know. It's not... Usually it's red. All red. This is not red."

"No shit," Will muttered, annoyed. "It's dark. It's cold. It's creepy, and that thing is in there trying to kill me."

Trench Coat frowned. "There's never anything alive in the firewalk, either. This is wrong. No wonder it fucking hurt."

"What are you talking about?" Will demanded, frustrated. "And what is that thing?"

"The fuck do I look like to you, kid? An encyclopedia salesman? I don't know where the hell we are, and I don't know what that thing is because I just got here. Something's wrong. I knew it was, but this... This is something else."

Will heard that noise again and took a step toward the kid in the coat. He didn't know if the gun was in the shed in this place, but maybe he could get to it.

"The hell was that?"

"I don't know. It... It looks a bit like the Demogorgon from Dungeons and Dragons, but that's not possible. And... I think it brought me here. It may have killed Veronica. I don't know. I don't know where I am. I mean, that looks like my house, but it's not my house."

"It went after Veronica?"

"You know her?"

Trench Coat didn't answer, but then that thing came toward them, running on all fours and snarling in that way it had. Will started to run and then fire shot out toward it, making it squeal in what might have been pain and back away.

Will stopped. "Did you just fireball him?"

Trench Coat dropped down to his knees again. "Damn, it hurts to do that here. Go, you idiot. Run."

“But... you hurt it. You can... you can kill it, right?”

The guy took a few breaths, his eyes on the monster. “It's not dead, and I don't know if I can do that again. Go. I'll hold it off for as long as I can.”

“But I don't—”

“If it hurt Veronica, it dies,” Trench Coat said. “If nothing else, I'll take it with me.”

“Did you set the fire at her house? Did you kill her parents?”

“Will,” Trench Coat snapped, and he stared in shock, not sure how this guy knew his name. “One time offer, kid. You go, you find a way out, and you make sure she's safe. Or I let that thing kill you because you're not very nice to her and you're pissing me off.”

Will looked back at the monster that was pacing now, looking like it wanted to make another run at them, and he nodded, knowing he had no other choice.

He ran.

15. Chapter 15

Summary for the Chapter:

Some missing time.

And someone's missing.

Notes for the Chapter:

So originally the idea was to make it so that one character's survival was a complete unknown until his reappearance at the end of the last chapter.

That... didn't go quite as planned, but that's why the early stuff is older, because it's his and he wasn't going to show himself again until he intervened with Will.

Some of this will be familiar as it's right from the show... just with a bit of adjustment for the stuff that's happened so far.

September 29

He should be dead.

He got shot, twice, burned a house, and firewalked with someone else, so he should be dead. Very dead. No surviving, just... gone in the fire like everything else.

He winced, forcing himself another step forward, knowing he knew his place, knowing he'd somehow pulled it up in his mind as he was bleeding and gotten himself close enough. It would have to do, for now, though he had to get back, had to know what happened to Veronica after he'd lost hold of her in the firewalk.

He pounded on the door and it opened, the man looking out at him

with a frown.

“What the hell? Wait, you're the kid that was with Bud Dean, aren't you? Where is he? He knows better than to show up here without a phone call.”

“Need... doctor,” he forced out the words, hating them because he hated doctors, all the ones that made him do test after test, like Papa. “Now.”

“Shit, you're bleeding,” the man muttered, opening the door. He yanked him inside and shut the door behind him. “You know this isn't the way I usually work. I have a very nice business that doesn't involve... this.”

He grabbed the nearest thing to support him so he wouldn't fall. “You sell drugs for money. I know what you do. Bud told me.”

“I'm surprised he did.”

“He was showing off his muscles.”

“Oh, that I'm sure he'd talk about for days,” the other man agreed, smiling. “All right, come here. Let's get a look at you. Coat off and shirt, too. Damn, I suppose you need my help with that.”

He tensed but let the man take off the coat since he couldn't do it himself, flinching again when he unbuttoned the shirt and pushed it off.

“Relax, kid. You're in the hands of Doctor Feel Good now,” the man told him. He reached over and grabbed a bottle off the counter, opening it and shaking one out into his palm. He lifted it up and grinned. “Take one of these. It'll help with the pain... and a lot of other stuff.”

He started to shake his head, backing away and bumping his side, which made the pain worse, and he fell, the blood coming fast again.

“Take it,” the doctor insisted. “This needs fucking surgery, and you don't want to be awake for that, kid. Trust me.”

"No," he tried to stop it, knowing he might do something really bad if he got drugged, something with fire or something else that he couldn't control. "Don't. Drugs bad. Can't—"

"Pretty sure you can handle these, kid. Bud went through them very fast," the doctor said, forcing his head back and dropping it in his mouth. He held it shut, pinching his nose so he couldn't breathe and swallowed it down. "There. Now I can work. And we'll discuss what you owe me when you're awake again."

His eyes opened, and he found himself staring at nothing. It was white, and that was about all he could tell. White, white, everywhere. He didn't like white. White was the lab, those awful rooms, the tests and the pain. Even the dark room they left him in was white when the lights were on.

He liked black. Black like Veronica's hair. Like his coat.

He grimaced. His coat was ruined. He needed another, but he didn't have any money.

"I see we're back in the land of the living," Doctor Feel Good said, grinning down at him and making him tense up. Most men who leaned over him like that didn't want anything good, and even Bud's smiles like that were creepy. "You'll be glad to know that you should make a full recovery. The bullet in your arm was a through and through, so it'll be sore but shouldn't have too much of a lasting impact on you. Now that one on your side... that was a little tricky. It stayed, and it could have taken something vital if it had been even a quarter inch in any other direction. You were damned lucky there."

He shook his head. He wasn't lucky. He was an experiment made all wrong in a lab. "Need go."

"Ah, no. I refuse to let you ruin my work," Feel Good said, pushing him back down on the wounded shoulder and making him scream in pain. "Don't worry. We can get you some more drugs as soon as we discuss payment. Bud and I had a standing arrangement where he'd call for a refill and I'd bill his account directly, but you're not here with Bud and you were very uncooperative at first as well as the fee I

charge for actually treating anyone instead of filling out a pre—”

“You can charge Bud... he doesn't have to come pay you?”

“No. He doesn't, but if you've had some sort of falling out and he did this to you—”

“Wasn't him.”

Feel Good nodded. “Didn't really figure it was. He said you were too valuable to be damaged, which was part of why he wanted the pills. Now—”

“What pills?”

“You have trouble sleeping?”

He did, often, because he remembered the lab and other stuff and unless he'd worn himself out in a fire he was very restless but that didn't mean much. “So?”

“So Bud found it annoying and would give you a pill to get you through the night more often than not. He said something about never having to pay for explosives again which would make his business turn an insane profit, but I have to say... not really sure anyone would pay enough for you to make that worth it, and it's a hell of a risk, pimping out a kid like that.”

He shook his head, turning away. Bud had made him explode buildings before, and it hurt but he could do it, only he couldn't tell the doctor that because he couldn't tell anyone about the fire.

“So you didn't know. Maybe he slipped you some of the pills to make it easier for you when you had a client, too.”

“Shut up,” he said, wanting to burn this creep and hoping he was wrong about Bud doing that to him, ever. Bud had only wanted him to make things burn. Not... not that.

“Kid, I don't take payment that way, so if that's what you were figuring on—”

“How much can you draw from Bud's money?”

The doctor frowned. “I don't know. There's always been enough to cover any pills he wants, but I don't see his bank statements.”

“Take it all out. Everything you can get.”

“If you had a fight with Bud—”

“Bud's dead. The people who shot me killed him. If you want your money, you'll take everything you can out of the account you have. You get paid. I get the rest.”

“You're a devious little slut, aren't you? Oh, I suppose I might see fit to give you part of it, assuming I get anything, but my fees and silence don't come cheap, trust me on that,” Feel Good said. “Now you'd better go back to resting. You have a long recovery ahead of you.”

He shook his head, but this time the doctor had a syringe, and he tried but couldn't stop it going into his arm. “Bastard.”

“I have a very lucrative business to protect here, and I really don't need you or Bud causing me problems, kid. If he's dead, fine, but I don't need the cops on me, and you are already more trouble than you're worth.”

“You'll regret this,” he warned the doctor just before he passed out again.

“That Bud's money?”

Feel Good jumped, looking back at him in surprise. “The fuck. I just gave you another dose. You should be out for days.”

He shook his head. “Bud didn't want me because he traded my body for supplies. He wanted me because I'm a freak made in a lab. I don't work like normal people do. And the drugs you gave me don't feel good at all, Doctor.”

“It was just a strong sedative.”

"You tried to give me an overdose," he said, certain of that. "Not of a sedative, either. Of a different kind of drug. And maybe it would have worked if I wasn't a freak from a lab, but I make fire. I burn things. I can burn drugs out of my system. I learned that at the lab, though I couldn't show them. I figured I'd show you. You tried to kill me."

"Now, kid, I know you think—"

He lifted a hand and set the man's lab coat on fire. Feel Good leapt from his chair, dropping it to the floor and stamping it out with his shoes.

"Damn."

"Bud's money is mine," he said, going to the desk. "I did my fair share of the work as he demanded, and I know he didn't have to spend money on stuff to destroy buildings because I did it. And he said that was a big savings. I earned it. So you are going to give that money to me and forget I was ever here."

"I don't know how you pulled that trick, kid, but one call to the cops —"

"Ruins your whole business. No more easy money writing perscriptions without actually seeing patients. No license. No drugs of your own to make you Feel Good. You want that? Because that's all if they even let you live. The lab... they don't like it when people know I exist, so they'll kill you if you tell anyone about me and what I can do. I can kill you here and now and spare you that, but I don't even think I want to. Being here leads them away from her, and I want that. So I should let them kill you."

"You're psychotic."

"The agent said that about me when she said I should be killed. They all said it. And almost all of them are dead. Burned in fire. So you can decide now—join them or not. You give me Bud's money, and we're done. You don't give me Bud's money, and I'll make sure they find you. They'll kill you for helping me. They'd want that. To make sure I could never be helped again by killing you."

“You're fucking scary, kid.”

“You haven't even seen a real fire from me,” he said, smiling though he knew he would never pull that off right now. That was why he had to have the money. He had to get supplies and a bus ticket, since he couldn't drive himself to Veronica, and he knew she was in danger.

“Fine. Take the money and go. Get the hell out of my house.”

He picked up the cash, needing a place to put it. He saw his coat in the trashcan and glared at Feel Good, digging it out. He knew it was bloody, but for now, it had to do.

He pulled it back on and went to put the money in the pocket when something bit him.

In spite of everything, he smiled, moving the money to the other pocket instead.

November 7

Jonathan knew he was staring, but he hadn't expected to see his cousin come out of her room looking like... that. She put Carol and Nicole to shame, and he swore his mom had never worn anything that nice in his entire life. She looked like a completely different person, and not one that belonged in their rag tag little house.

“That's a nice outfit,” his mom told her. “Barb and Nancy bought that for you, too?”

Veronica nodded. “I picked it out, though. I used to have one like it. Last year's style, but similar. Heather Chandler told me it was ugly, but I loved it, even if I had to wear blue tights with it that kind of ruined the look.”

“What?” Jonathan asked, confused. Why would anyone wear blue tights with that black and white combo she had on?

"We were color-coded," Veronica said. "It's stupid. Really."

"Right," he said, because he couldn't understand it at all, and he wasn't sure he wanted to try and ask about it again. Still, he thought she'd make a good picture in that outfit, and kids at school were going to be jealous, which would only make things worse for her again.

"I like it, and I think it's better without blue tights, but I'm no expert," his mom told her, pulling on her own shirt with a grimace. "I don't remember the last time I—well, that's not important."

"If we do get that money from the lawyer, I want to get you something," Veronica said, and his mom stared at her. "A lot of it, actually. Your clothes are worn pretty thin, and none of them fit you properly, so... I want to do that, too."

"I don't need new—"

"Yes, you do," Jonathan said. "And if she wants to do it, you let her."

"That's not fair, the two of you ganging up on me like that," Joyce said. She shook her head, fighting a smile as she went toward the door. Then she stopped, turning back. "I almost forgot. I wanted to call Karen and make sure Will didn't need anything for school because I know he didn't take it with him on Saturday."

"Of course not," Jonathan agreed, taking the pan over to serve Veronica, who had set the table while he was distracted.

Veronica lifted the juice, making a slight face as she drank it, and he wondered if she didn't like it. It wasn't old enough to have gone bad yet. He put food on his own plate and put the pan in the sink, grabbing the toast on the way back, taking it to his mom.

"Hey, Karen," she said into the phone. "I just wanted to check and see if Will needed anything for school this morning."

He held out the bread, and she took it with a smile that dropped in an instant.

"He's not there? He... he didn't stay overnight?"

Veronica's fork clattered against her plate. He looked back at her, and she shook her head, trying for another sip of her juice, like it would calm her down. He almost handed her one of his mom's cigarette's, but he didn't want to encourage that in either of them.

His mom hung up the phone, shaking, her hand on her mouth.

"Mom?"

"She said he left at eight-fifteen."

Glass shattered on the floor, and he turned back to see Veronica had dropped her juice on the floor, shaking her head in disbelief as she backed away from it.

"No. That wasn't real. It wasn't," she said, sounding desperate. "It... no. I'm just crazy. That thing... it couldn't have taken Will... It didn't have a face... it's... No."

Jonathan grimaced. "Okay, just sit down, both of you. On the couch. That's it. Here. I'm going to search the house and the yard and the sheds. Maybe he just... didn't want to stay in my room last night. He never does, right?"

Veronica bit her lip. "I was there. I didn't stop that thing. I... don't understand. Why didn't it take me? Why do I keep living?"

"Don't say that," his mom said, pulling her into his arms. "Okay, Jonathan and I need to look around the house. You just stay here and let us look for him. We're going to find him. We're going to find Will."

Veronica buried her face in her knees, and Jonathan hated to leave her alone, but he had to look for Will. Something must have happened last night, but it wasn't a monster, and maybe she was confused and Will was just out in Castle Byers or something?

"It'll be okay. We'll find him," his mom insisted, touching her shoulder. Veronica didn't look up. "Um... you..."

"I'll go to Castle Byers. You check the sheds."

"So, did he call?" Barb asked, catching up to Nancy in the hall. She'd cut their conversation on the phone short last night, and while Barb had thought maybe Veronica would call instead, it never came. Instead, she'd gotten only about half the story from Nancy about Saturday and that wasn't enough.

"Keep your voice down," Nancy hissed, looking around like it was some big secret.

Barb fought not to roll her eyes. Everyone already knew what was going on. This town was not that big, and the high school was even smaller. "Did he?"

"I told you, it's not like that," Nancy said, and Barb did roll her eyes then. "Okay, I mean, yes, he likes me, but not like that. We just made out a couple times."

"We just made out a couple times," Barb quoted back at her mockingly, amused by the attempt at denial. It was exactly what everyone thought it was. Everyone could see it a mile away. They weren't blind. Barb was not blind. "Nance, seriously, you're gonna be so cool now, it's ridiculous."

Nancy shook her head as they reached her locker. "No, I'm not."

"You better still hang out with me, that's all I'm saying," Barb said, leaning against the other lockers. She hoped she sounded casual about it, though admittedly, she was worried. Between her own fears and what Veronica had said, she didn't know how to feel about Nancy becoming the girlfriend of the most popular boy in school. "If you become friends with Tommy H or Carol—"

"Oh, that's gross," Nancy said with exaggerated horror. "Okay, I'm telling you, it was a one time—two time thing."

Nancy opened her locker and took out a folded up piece of paper. She opened it, reading the message in blue marker. *Meet me in the bathroom.* -Steve

"You were saying?" Barb asked, and Nancy flushed. "Go on. I'm going to see if I can find Veronica."

“You haven't seen her yet today?”

Barb shook her head. “No, but I haven't checked her favorite spot yet. I'll do that now. Someone's waiting for you.”

Nancy smiled and bounced off to the bathroom. Barb tried not to let it bother her, but she was concerned. She shook her head at herself, hoping she wasn't jealous—she wasn't, she wasn't interested in Steve—but she was worried about what being friends with those other kids would mean for Nancy.

She walked outside, following the building around to the corner where Veronica liked to smoke.

She frowned when she saw two other kids leaning against the brick, making out. Neither of them was Veronica, but they wouldn't have dared do it if she was around, since half the school was scared of her and the rest avoided her like the plague.

Where was Veronica?

Barb bit her lip, suddenly regretting leaving her alone last night.

Hop's head felt like he'd been on a three day bender when he dragged himself up off the couch. He'd sworn he was just having a drink to take the edge off his frustration, one before bed, not six or seven or even a pill, but his table was covered with empty cans.

He shook his head at himself as he dragged himself through getting ready, forcing himself through the motions. They had plenty to do today, and he was already late. Powell and Callahan might have taken Lonnie over to the courthouse already by the time he got there.

He drove into town, still feeling like shit and wondering what the hell he'd been thinking having that much last night. Sure, he'd wanted to talk himself out of something crazy like driving back to Joyce's in the middle of the night to look for this stalker boyfriend of Veronica's, but he had been set on one and done. He had plans for this morning, and he had no intention of letting Lonnie Byers walk.

He parked in a hurry, getting out and going inside.

“Good of you to show,” Flo said, like she'd been waiting for him, and judging from her expression, she had, and she was pissed about it.

“Oh, hey, morning, Flo,” Hop said, trying to ignore how badly his head was throbbing. He crossed around to where the box of doughnuts were. “Morning, everybody.”

“Hey, Chief.” Powell didn't sound very happy with him, either.

“Damn,” Callahan said. “You look like hell, Chief.”

He felt it, like he'd been kicked when he was down, and his head refused to clear even for a second. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I looked better than your wife when I left her this morning,” he said, and the office broke out in laughter, all but Flo who was still very pissed.

“While you were drinking or sleeping, or whatever it is you deemed so necessary on Monday morning, the boys prepped to take Lonnie Byers to the courthouse,” Flo said, and he looked back at them, frowning. Why were they still here, then? That was their prisoner, and they were playing cards when he was due in court any minute now. “And we got more complaints about those garden gnomes.”

“Well, I'll tell you what, I'm gonna get right on that,” Hop said, taking a bite of his doughnut.

“On a more pressing matter, Joyce Byers—”

“Mmm,” Hop cut her off, not wanting to get into that in front of everyone. “Okay, I'm gonna get on that. Just give me a minute.”

“Joyce is very upset,” Flo began, “and her niece—”

“Flo, Flo, we've discussed this,” he said. “Mornings are for coffee and contemplation.”

“Chief, she's already in your—”

"Coffee and contemplation, Flo," he called over his shoulder, rounding the corner to stop when he saw Joyce waiting inside his office. Fuck.

She rose shakily from her chair, and he knew whatever this was, it was not good. "Hop."

"Just a second, Joyce," he said, turning back to the other room. "Get off your asses and get Lonnie Byers over to the courthouse. Now."

He held up a hand before Flo could lecture him and went back down the hall to Joyce. He shut the office door behind him. "I almost want you to be here to give me an earful about yesterday."

"Did you test those pills?"

"What?"

"Veronica's medication. Did you test it?"

Shit. He'd forgotten all about that. "No, I haven't had time yet. What is it, Joyce? What's wrong?"

"It's Will. He's missing."

"I have been waiting here over an hour, Hopper," Joyce said, feeling her frustration get to her. Hop seemed different from last night when he was so intent on pushing the fire and looking into Veronica's boyfriend. Now he seemed to be moving slowly at everything, like none of this mattered.

"And I apologize again."

"I'm going out of my mind," she said. "And I am not the only one. Jonathan's upset, and Veronica... She's a complete mess."

"A boy his age, he could just playing hookie, right?"

How could Hop say that after last night? "No, not my Will. He's not like that. He wouldn't do that."

“Well, you never know,” Hop said, giving her a bit of a smile as he leaned away from his typewriter. “I mean, my mom thought I was on the debate team, when really I was just screwing Chrissy Carpenter in the back of my dad's Oldsmobile, so—”

“Look, he's not like you, Hopper. He's not like me. He's not like... most,” Joyce admitted. She knew her son was not the same as other kids. Neither of them were. “He has a couple of friends, but, you know, the kids, they're mean. They make fun of him. They call him names. They laugh at him, his clothes—”

“His clothes?” Hop asked, frowning like that made no sense. “What's wrong with his clothes?”

“I don't know,” Joyce said, pacing with her cigarette. “Does that matter?”

“Maybe.”

Bullshit it did. He was being an asshole today, and after the last few days, she wanted to smack him for that. “Why are you wasting both of our time on this?”

“Excuse me? You're the one who came in here and said he was missing. I'm taking your report. You're telling me more about the boy. How is any of that wasting our time?”

She sighed. She was a little on edge, and she knew it. Maybe Hop wasn't that bad. “Look, he's—he's a sensitive kid. Lonnie—Lonnie used to say he was queer. Called him a fag.”

Hop looked up again. “Is he?”

She glared at him. That so didn't matter. “He's missing is what he is.”

“Joyce, try and calm down. Ninety-nine out of a hundred times, kid goes missing, the kid is with a parent or relative,” Hop said, continuing to type.

“What about the other time?”

“What?”

“You said, 'ninety-nine out of a hundred,’” she reminded him. “What about the other time, the one? Because we both fucking know he wasn't with Lonnie. He couldn't be with Lonnie. He was locked up in your jail cell, remember? Will is not with Lonnie, and we don't have anyone else. So don't give me any ninety-nine times bullshit.”

“Joyce,” Hop said, sighing. “This is Hawkins, okay? You wanna know the worst thing that's ever happened here in the four years I've been working here? Do you wanna know the worst thing? It was when an owl attacked Eleanor Gillespie's head because it thought that her hair was a nest.”

She started pacing again. “I know, but Hop, Veronica said last night a monster took him. And we all just ignored her because she's got so many issues going on right now, but she saw something. Some man or thing without a face. He took Will.”

Hop shook his head. “We don't know what she saw, Joyce. It might not have been real. It almost certainly wasn't real.”

“You thought her boyfriend was stalking her,” Joyce said. “What if... what if he did something to Will? What the hell are we going to do?”

Hop rose. “Did you bring Veronica here?”

Joyce shook her head. “She wasn't up to that. She... she took it hard when Karen said he didn't stay the night, and Jonathan and I searched the house and the yard and even his place in the woods, but he's not there. He's nowhere.”

“That doesn't mean something bad happened to him. Don't go assuming that yet. He could just be lost. He might have taken a wrong turn home and—”

“Just find my son, Hop,” Joyce said, knowing she had to get back to Jonathan and Veronica. “Find him.”

16. Chapter 16

Summary for the Chapter:

Nine has an unexpected traveling companion.

The search for Will begins.

Notes for the Chapter:

I have mixed feelings about the direction the flashback scenes went. It fits, but it doesn't, and I have used bits in mention from season two, but this was different, so... I almost cut them and then didn't, and I'm still not sure about the decision to leave them in.

And then I kind of mostly followed the show again, but some things changed, of course, and there's one area where I think my changes have the least impact (Eleven's story through season one, at least in the beginning) so I was a bit at a loss there as there wasn't much I could contribute to those scenes, not even alternate point of view... and then there was, but it didn't cover much of those scenes. Still... I tried.

October 2

He shopped first.

He learned a long time ago that bloody clothes made people nervous. So did ones that showed signs of fire or hospital gowns or ones that were ripped by jerks on the streets. He needed something fresh and clean so that he didn't draw too much attention to himself, and it wasn't hard to find a second hand store that had exactly what he needed in coats.

He picked up a couple new shirts and pairs of dark jeans, one black one denim, and a black duffel bag storing everything inside it, even Slushie in his brand new hamster ball. He figured it was safer for him in there than just his pocket, though he would put him back there any time he needed to firewalk.

As it was, though, he was still too weak from being shot and drugged by Bud's doctor "friend" to do much of anything with his abilities.

He changed, burned the old clothes just in case, with a lighter, much to his disappointment, and headed out on the first bus he could take with a slushie in hand and a carton of cigarettes added to his bag. He had made sure Slushie was fed and watered before getting on, and all he had to do was sit back and rest all the way to his destination.

He closed his eyes only to have the person across from him start talking.

"I've never been able to do that, sleep on a bus," the woman said, and he looked over at her in annoyance. "Can't get comfortable."

He wasn't comfortable. He hurt like hell. "I was more comfortable before you started talking."

"Really," she said, shaking her head. "Such rudeness."

"Do I look like I want to talk, lady?"

She just smiled at him, so he reached for a cigarette, lit it like always, grimacing when he gave himself a headache, and took a drag, blowing smoke in her face only to have her vanish.

Fuck. That was weird.

"I thought that was you," a different voice said, this time belonging to a dark skinned girl with a slight lilt to her voice. She leaned over the back of the seat in front of him. "Nine."

He studied her. "Eight. Should have known the minute that hag disappeared. The fuck do you want?"

"What do you think?" Eight countered. "You come to my city and

expect me not to be concerned?”

He'd been here before without her noticing, and he hadn't even known she was here. “You and I never had a problem before. You want one now, you'll regret it.”

“I have a problem if you bring them down on me and my friends.”

“I didn't know you were here, and I could care less,” he told her. “I was here because I knew a doctor here I could exploit to get patched up, that's it.”

“They're still hunting you.”

“Some of us don't have the luxury of illusions that can make us invisible to them,” he said. “Some of us are too dangerous to live. I want to sleep. You're pissing me off. This is not a good idea. You've been warned.”

She laughed, moving into the chair across from him where she'd created the illusion before. “I've been fighting back against them. You could help.”

Maybe he would have been tempted, if he hadn't met Veronica and put her in danger. “Have things of my own to take care of.”

“Yeah? Like what? That rat in your bag?”

“If I set you on fire, Eight, it's not an illusion. It'll fucking hurt,” he told her. “And it's a hamster, not a rat.”

“Whatever.”

“They took someone. A friend. Only one I've ever had,” he said, though he wasn't sure that what he was with Veronica was a friend because as he understood it, friends didn't kiss like they'd kissed, and he thought they'd come close to other things that friends didn't do, either. “I have to get her back.”

“They took her? As in... experiments? She's like us?”

“She's different,” he said. “Not our different, but different. And she's

not an experiment. She's bait. They're going to keep hurting her until I stop them."

"Shit." Eight leaned across the aisle. "You're sure they're going to do this?"

"Too dangerous to live, remember?"

She nodded. "They'd do it. What is your plan? Going in and burning them down?"

He didn't have one beyond finding Veronica again. He'd make it up when he knew what he was really up against. He didn't know enough yet to know what he was going to do. "Depends on what they've done."

"You said they had her, though."

"So it could mean burning the whole place down. It might not. It depends on where they're keeping her. I don't know that yet."

Eight folded her arms over her chest. "How do you know they have her and not know where the hell she is or how much security they have? Is she at the lab or not?"

"I had to leave and lost control of my escape. I don't know what happened after that." He shook his head. "Don't fucking look at me like that. You are in no place to judge. You didn't help anyone else when you left."

"That was different. You'd gone away from the room long before Eleven did. I didn't know where you were, where she was. I left. I did what I could, going after those I knew were involved. I've dealt with many of them."

"You mean you killed them."

"And you have not killed? You are a weapon, nothing more."

Veronica had seen more. She'd believed he was more than what Papa had said he was, what everyone at the lab said he was, than the men on the street used him for, and that made her worth everything in the

world to him.

"I'll do what I need to, and I'll get her back. I don't need you or anyone else, Eight."

"Only a fool refuses help when it's offered."

"I was never smart."

Eight laughed. "No, you weren't."

"Tell me about her."

"Go away, Eight, or I swear I will light you on fire," he said, refusing to look at her. He was tired, and he wanted to sleep. His side was throbbing, and he needed to rest if he was going to be able to use his abilities any time soon, and he would need them to help Veronica.

"Come on," she said, crawling over the seat until she was next to him, putting his bag on the floor and taking the empty chair beside him. "Tell me. I'd introduce you to my friends."

He snorted. "The hell you would, Eight."

"Kali," she said. He did look at her then. "My name is Kali. It was before they took me. It is again now that I'm free. I am not Eight. I am myself."

He studied her. "Did I have a name besides Nine?"

She shook her head. "Not that we ever knew, though we weren't allowed to call ourselves by our old names. If you had one, you likely forgot it, if you ever knew it. I was taken when I was older, old enough to remember, but Eleven... I remember her as a baby. You'd have to, too."

"I don't like to remember."

"None of us do."

"Oh, you've talked to all of us, have you?"

She shook her head. "I only ever knew the four of us, eight through eleven. I don't know if the others are alive. Only you."

He looked away. "I think Eleven is alive. I was a failure. She wasn't."

"And Ten?"

"Dead, I think. Don't know. Been too long since he left the rainbow room. I never... saw Eleven. I just... I overheard them. The agent, she wanted me dead the first time I set a real fire. Papa said they'd finally figured out what I was supposed to be, so I stayed, but she didn't want me pulled from the room. She wanted me dead."

"She's a bitch. If I could get to her without going near that place..."

"Could have had her last week in Sherwood, Ohio."

"He sent her out after you."

"Don't think I'll be your bait. I'm no one's bait. I do what I want now. Not what anyone else wants. Not Papa. Not the men I met. Not Bud. Not you."

She looked at him. "They hurt you, these people you met. Everyone since you were free of them?"

"Everyone but her."

"Then she is very special. Very rare." Kali looked him over. "Do you love her?"

He didn't know what love was, and he didn't want to ask her. She'd laugh at him. He didn't want that. He closed his eyes again. "She knew what I was and wasn't afraid of me. That was all that mattered."

"That matters."

"Your friends like that?"

She nodded. "They are. Axel he is... impulsive and foolish, but brave in his way, except when it comes to spiders. Mick is our eyes and our

protector. She drives for us, keeps us safe. Funshine is our warrior. He would die for us, and his size is fearsome, but he is a teddy bear.”

“A what?”

Eight—Kali—frowned. “You don't know what a teddy bear is?”

He shook his head. “Been out here a while, but things... still don't always make sense. Papa kept me ignorant. Bud did the same. They used me. Bud I... let use me. It was... protection, of a sort.”

“You let him use you?”

“He liked explosions. He gave me money, shelter, clothes, food... for blowing up buildings. Was... okay. Not as bad as being on my own was.”

“He let you use your abilities,” she said. “That is a change.”

“Bud liked the idea of saving money on each job. Well... of making extra,” he said. “He'd still charge them for the explosives, just not use them. He was making a lot of money off each job with me around. It... made it worth putting up with me.”

“He hurt you.”

“Eight, I swear—”

“You won't do that here, not when it might mean you can't get to her,” Eight said. “And you're not as stupid as to think that burning your bridges with me is something you want.”

“We're not on a bridge.”

She threw her head back and laughed. “Oh, you. Still so literal. We need to give you a bit more education in the ways of the world.”

He shook his head. “I'm not a virgin. That's... taken care of.”

She looked at him, that same worried one Veronica had given him when he talked about that stuff. “Did they say that was why they were doing it? To educate you in the ways of the world?”

“Yes. Stop looking at me like that.”

She put her hand on his. “Nine. Brother, that wasn't something you should have had to learn until you were ready for it. Some adults would say you still shouldn't know. They would see only the child in you, nothing else.”

“I am not a child. I'm a monster.”

She shook her head. “No. You are gifted. There's a difference. And what they did was wrong.”

“If it helps any, most of them are dead. I... I burned the ones I could. They killed others I didn't looking for me. Most are gone.” He fidgeted, his side bothering him again. “I don't want to talk. I need to sleep. I won't be any use if I don't sleep.”

“Do you ever sleep without nightmares?”

“I hate you so much right now.”

She nodded. “I'm sure you do, but I have had things you have not. I have those I trust, and around them, I can sleep. I know peace. I have chosen a path to heal my wounds. You are still lost.”

He'd thought he could sleep around Bud. Apparently, though, he'd just been drugged every night, and that explained a lot but also sickened him because he'd almost trusted Bud and it felt so wrong to have been tricked like that, even if maybe it was for good reasons.

“Sleep. I will give you a good dream for the night.”

November 7

“All right,” Hop said, guiding Joyce down the hall toward the door. “You go back to the house, wait there. He may still show up. You okay to drive? You need me to have Flo take you or—”

“You're not coming?” Joyce asked. “Don't you have to talk to

Veronica? She saw something last night. It... It sounds insane, but she said it took Will, and whatever it is—”

“Whatever it is, I will investigate it, too,” Hop promised, though how the hell he was going to find a monster without a face, he didn't know. “Look, she was confused about what happened last night, couldn't make sense of it, and I think the last thing you want right now is me pushing that. So what I'm gonna do is take it a step back, go to his friends, find out when he left, what was going on when he did, and retrace his steps home. I want to be sure he was actually there. Maybe all this was... she had a bad dream and it left her with the sense that Will was in trouble. That happens. To everyone, not just—”

“The lunatics in my family?” Joyce asked, folding her arms over her chest. “Because Aunt Darlene used to have them, but then... she was never right, not after...”

Not after she disappeared, no. Whatever happened to her when she was gone really screwed her up, but no one was sure what it was. She just got weirder and weirder after that, so much so by the time that Hop was a kid everyone thought she was a raving lunatic and she ended up committed to a home somewhere upstate.

“Joyce, I don't think either of you are crazy,” Hop said. “Now, worse case scenario at this point... I think she may have warped what she saw with Will because she doesn't want to believe that her boyfriend was involved in any of this, not the fire and not what happened to Will.”

Joyce flinched. “Oh, Hop—”

“And it could be devastating for her, having to face that, so until we're sure Will made it home, I'm not going to browbeat her over it. If she tells you anything else, that's fine. Until then, I'm going to go with the assumption something happened on the way home, and I'm going to search along that path.”

Joyce shuddered. “It was so cold last night—”

“I know, but that doesn't mean he's dead,” Hop said. “Do you need

someone to drive you back home?"

She shook her head. "No, I'll be fine. I just... We have to find him."

"And we will," Hop said, taking her the rest of the way to the door. He watched her get into her car, hoping he wasn't making a mistake in sending her home on her own.

He turned back and went to the desk. "Flo, I need—"

"I can call one of the boys back to meet you at the middle school," she said. "I suppose you want me to dig up information on this boyfriend as well."

"I don't even have a name for him," Hop said. He dug into his pocket, looking for the pills, and he frowned. Wait a damned minute. They weren't there. The cigarette wasn't there. The hell. This was the same uniform shirt as last night. Had to be. The others were at the dry cleaner's. He'd dropped them off before heading into work yesterday.

Had he put them somewhere in his house?

Fine. He'd get new samples when he got back to Joyce's place.

"There wasn't anything in Rhodes' file on the fire. He didn't seem to know that the boyfriend existed," Hop said. "I'd like more information, but it'll have to come from the girl."

Flo nodded. "I'll start gathering volunteers for search parties."

Mike tried to stay calm. A few minutes ago, they'd been happily trying to reach Australia on the radio, laughing about how much Will would love seeing that thing, and now they'd been told Will was missing. He hadn't gone home last night.

Will was missing.

Mike didn't know what to think about that, how to think about it. He'd thought it was a little weird when they didn't see Will in school, but Will tended to get sick more than any of the rest of them—not that he should say that because it almost seemed like he was saying it

was because Will's mom had less money than the rest of them did, but it kind of was because that was true—Dustin's mom was on her own, too, but she only had Dustin to support, not two boys, and Dustin's dad hadn't been any kind of Lonnie Byers, either. He died, and it was sad, but not like Will's situation.

“Okay, okay, okay,” Hopper said, talking over Lucas and Dustin who'd been arguing over something, again. “One at a time, all right? You. You said he takes what home?”

Mike realized the chief was talking to him this time. He swallowed. “Mirkwood.”

“Mirkwood?” the chief repeated, and the three of them nodded in agreement.

“Yeah.”

The chief looked at his officer. “Have you ever heard of Mirkwood?”

“I have not,” the other man answered. “That sounds made up to me.”

“No, it's from Lord of the Rings,” Lucas corrected, though that didn't explain much to the cops. It was a real place, just they used their own name for it, and he should have known better than to say it.

“Well, *The Hobbit*,” Dustin corrected, and he was right, Mirkwood was only mentioned in the trilogy because Legolas was from there.

“It doesn't matter.”

“He asked,” Dustin said, and Lucas rolled his eyes, mocking him.

“He asked.”

“Shut up, guys,” Mike said, frustrated. He didn't want to fight about that. He wanted to find Will.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Hopper interrupted, silencing the fight. “What'd I just say? One at a damn time. You.”

Mike noticed he'd been chosen again. He sighed. “Mirkwood, it's a

real road. It's just the name that's made up. It's where Cornwallis and Kerley meet.”

“Yeah, all right, I think I know that—”

“We can show you, if you want,” Mike offered, wanting to go now and look for Will. They had to find him. He must have been hurt or something not to show up today.

“I said that I know it,” Hopper told them. He seemed really frustrated, though Mike couldn't be sure because he didn't know him well.

“We can help look,” Mike said, hearing the others echo him in the offer.

“No,” Hopper said, his voice a little cold and very stern. “No. After school, you are all to go home. Immediately. That means no biking around looking for your friend, no investigating, no nonsense. This isn't some Lord of the Rings book.”

“*The Hobbit*,” Dustin corrected again.

“Shut up.”

Mike found himself caught in the middle of another fight again.

“Stop it,” Hopper said, his voice even louder than the last time. He waited for them to stop, going still and silent. “Do I make myself clear?”

Mike didn't want to agree. Agreeing meant they weren't going to do anything to help, and he wanted to help. He had to help. This was Will. This was their party. They had to.

“Do I make myself clear?” the chief repeated, and there was no avoiding it this time.

“Yes, sir.”

He could eat a house.

He thought that was the expression. He couldn't remember for sure, because that stuff still confused him, but he was very, very hungry, and he needed to recoup badly, so badly he was putting himself at risk and he knew it.

Oh, he'd put a ridiculous hat on his head, one he'd swiped from someone's car outside the diner, and he'd left his jacket outside so that he'd be less recognizable for anyone from the lab. He knew it wasn't much, but he didn't have a choice.

He felt worse than he had when he'd been shot, and he'd completely lost control over the firewalk because he swore he hadn't even wanted to do it. He'd driven that thing, whatever the hell it was—a demogorgon, what even was that?—away a few times and then gotten smarter about it even as he got weaker.

The demogorgon wasn't the only thing that hated the fire. As far as he could tell, everything in that place did, so he'd set up a good one all around the Byers house, figuring if nothing else, that would keep the thing at bay.

Next thing he knew, he'd fallen back into this place and was too tired and sore to move.

And starving. He was starving.

He had already eaten half the menu and wanted more, needing to restore his energy levels because that had taken a lot out of him, and he still didn't understand it. He'd known, from the moment he set foot in Hawkins, that it was different. It took a lot less to firewalk here, and he couldn't explain it, but he didn't care so long as it let him come and go as he pleased to watch over Veronica.

He'd wanted to get closer to her, but he could see the signs of them watching her, and he'd only dared go close when she was in Indianapolis. That was almost safe except for her friends showing up. He had to leave. If they saw him, they were at risk, and he was tired of getting people killed. He didn't want Veronica hurt by losing people that were kind to her.

And he knew they had a problem because he hadn't found Will again

before he left that place. He'd been playing with that thing and couldn't think of anything else. His mind was focused on trying to keep that thing at bay—it kept staying out of reach so he couldn't kill it—and then he'd fallen out of there without even meaning to, so that kid was stuck there.

He had to get himself better and go back in to find him, but he still felt like he could sleep for days, and he couldn't hold off that thing if he did go back, not in this state.

He needed sleep, more food, and maybe some drugs for the pain, even if he hated drugs.

He carried his basket back to the counter, wanting to order another one. He set it there, and the big man who seemed to run this place gave it and then him a look.

“Another,” he croaked out, his voice still a bit strange since he'd gotten back here from that firewalk. “Please.”

“You can really pack it away for someone your size. You sure you want all that?”

He nodded and picked up a couple bags of chips, putting them on the counter and adding one of the bills from Bud's money. He still had a lot, but he still worried every time he spent some because he knew he couldn't get more again, not from Bud.

“Okay,” the man said, taking the bill and handing him back change. “It'll be a few minutes on the rest of it.”

He nodded, opening one of the bags of chips as he returned to his table in the corner away from the others. He sat back and started eating, knowing he'd have to sleep next, which meant dragging himself back to his shelter here. Not that he shouldn't, it was past time to feed Slushie, but he was so sore he didn't want to move.

He'd go after he was done eating, and he had a lot more eating to do. He'd have to buy some more chips to take with him.

And someday, he needed to learn to cook for himself.

He was on his second bag of chips and feeling even drowsier than before when someone shouted, and he looked over to see the big man yelling and running into the kitchen.

“You think you can steal from me, boy?”

He looked over to see the cook had caught someone in his kitchen, someone with a shaved head and a hospital gown. He tensed. Ten was dead, he was almost sure of that, and would have been older, too. Was that... Eleven?

She was free, but... that wasn't as good a thing as it seemed. They'd be coming here. They would. He knew that.

He forced himself up, knowing it was a risk going near the girl, but he couldn't stay here. She'd lead them right to him, and he was in no state to fight them off right now. He stopped at the counter, and the cook looked over at him.

“It's going to be a bit longer,” the man said. “Had... an incident.”

“Need to go,” he said, and the other man winced, still holding onto Eleven. “You keep that. I'll take chips instead.”

“Uh... yeah, sure,” the cook agreed, distracted, and he picked out a few bags, walking out with them and going around the back to get his coat.

He pulled it on, stashing the chips in his pockets and taking out a cigarette. He dug out the lighter, annoyed again to need it, and lit the cigarette, looking at the building again. They'd be here. They'd come for Eleven. She might not know it, but he did.

He had to come back, couldn't let them take her if he could stop it.

First, though, he had to sleep. He'd be no use if he didn't.

“Will Byers?” Hop walked around the woods by the place Will's friends had given him. He didn't know this place that well, though he'd made the drive to the house plenty of times before. He had no idea the kids had nicknamed it—certainly wasn't called that back

when Joyce's parents were alive and owned the place, when he was over here more than he was home, but every generation was different.

He put a hand to his head. God, he felt sick, and he really didn't want to be doing this, hungover as he was, but he couldn't ignore the fact that Will was missing. He was kicking himself for having more than one drink—something he still didn't remember doing—when all of this shit was going on.

He knew something was wrong with Veronica, with everything they'd been told about the fire. He had fucked up a lot since his daughter died and his marriage ended, but he'd been managing since he came back to Hawkins. Most of the time, this was a job where going through the motions was enough, and he needed that at first.

Then boredom sank in and things got worse, but he had Lonnie Byers in a jail cell and Joyce's niece under threat. He was better than this, and he was beyond angry with himself for slipping so far. This wasn't like him.

“Will! Will Byers! Come on, kid!”

At least the thing with Lonnie had gone the way it should have, or so Powell had reported when he rejoined them. Lonnie'd been charged with assault, and the judge had been far less than sympathetic to his cause, setting his bail high and making it so he wasn't going anywhere.

Hop wished he'd been able to see it, but he'd settle for knowing Lonnie would stay locked up while they found Will.

“Hey, I got something,” he called out, almost stumbling over the bike in the gulch.

“That his bike?” Powell asked.

Hop was pretty sure he'd seen this bike before. He wasn't around Joyce or her kids often, but in the last month, at least, since Veronica became part of their lives, he'd seen a lot more of her and them than he had in years. “Yeah, he must have crashed.”

“You think he got hurt in the fall?”

“Not so hurt he couldn't walk away,” Hop said. If Will had been badly injured when he crashed, he'd have been right here with the bike or so close they'd have found him by now. “Bike like this is like a Cadillac to these kids. He would've walked it home.”

Hop picked up the bike and carried it back with him to the truck. They were damned close to Joyce's house now, and he knew if Will was able to walk, he'd very likely made it home.

Hop didn't like this. If Will made it home, then Veronica definitely did see something, and if she did... exactly what kind of monster were they dealing with? Her boyfriend or someone else?

“Mom, he's not there. We already checked,” Jonathan said, pulling her back from Castle Byers. The little hut was empty, same as it was when he got here this morning. He'd looked around the area, too, as far as he dared before returning to the house to find his mom in near hysterics after searching the sheds.

“I know. I just... I have to keep looking, keep searching. I have to do *something*,” his mom said. “I can't just sit around.”

He understood that. He couldn't, either. “Let's go back and start making the flyers we talked about, Mom. Maybe someone around town has seen something.”

She nodded. “I... We'll need pictures. I don't know if we have any new ones. I haven't taken pictures in forever. I don't...”

“I've got some,” Jonathan said. He had plenty, since Will was usually willing to help him when he was tinkering with a new lens or techniques that didn't work on still life or scenery. “I'll get them.”

“I'll check on Veronica,” his mom said, and he grimaced, glad to be spared that. If she'd been bad before, she was inconsolable now, blaming herself for not saving Will from whatever monster had come in the house.

He blamed himself for thinking she had just made it all up, for

assuming that Will had just stayed the night at the Wheeler's without checking. Sure, he'd been over there a lot, but after what Veronica said, he should have at least called, no matter how tired he was or how crazy it sounded.

He held the door open for her, and she had just stepped inside when he heard the cars. "Mom?"

"What?"

"Cops."

She ran back out with him onto the porch, watching as Hopper stopped his truck, going around to the back and opening it. They watched as he took Will's bike out of the back of the truck.

Jonathan swallowed, feeling sick again. "Where was it?"

"Up the road a bit, lying in a gully off the side, not visible from the road, but we were walking it, and it was there."

His mom frowned. "It was just lying there?"

"Yeah."

"Did it have any blood on it or—"

"No, no, no, no, no," Hopper said, reaching out to touch Joyce's arm. "Look, he probably crashed, but it wasn't so bad he was lying there dead. Didn't see any signs of a major injury, either. No blood. No trail from here to the house."

"Okay, so... what does that mean?"

"It means he walked away from the crash."

"And left his bike behind?" Jonathan asked, frowning. That didn't sound like his brother. Will was too responsible to leave it like that, not without a good reason. He knew as well as Jonathan did that they didn't have the money to replace it.

"I want the boys to take a look around the place," Hopper answered.

“And I want a look myself. He had a key to the house, right? So maybe he came home.”

And maybe Veronica's monster, whatever it was, had actually taken Will, like she said.

“You think I didn't check my own house?”

“I'm not saying that,” Hopper gestured to the house. “Let's go inside, go through it again.”

Jonathan frowned again, following his mom and the chief inside. He saw the other officers walking the yard and tried not to be bothered by it. They were all here to help.

“What's going on, Hop?”

He didn't answer right away, stopping to look at a hole in the wall. “Has this always been here?”

“What?” Joyce shook her head. “I don't know. Probably. I mean, I have two boys. Look at this place.”

Jonathan tried not to get angry about that. He did his best to keep the place clean. Will wasn't that messy. And Veronica had been doing more to clean up after herself lately.

“You're not sure?”

“Hop, what is going on?”

He sighed. “I have to talk to Veronica. With that bike being so close... I think Will made it home last night, Joyce. And I don't know what happened after that, but we have to find out.”

“Veronica? We need to talk to you.”

She looked up at her aunt, forcing herself to swallow and nod, giving the room another look. She felt a bit shaky, again, and she didn't want to do this, but she had to. She knew that.

Her aunt led her out into the living room, where the chief of police was standing, waiting for her. Jonathan was there, too, and she wanted to run back in where she was alone again. She wasn't sure she could do this.

"Gotta ask you about last night again," Hopper told her. "Need to know everything you can tell us. We found Will's bike up the road. Looks like he could have made it home."

Veronica bit her lip. Joyce put her hands on her shoulders. "Sweetheart, no one blames you for this, no one is saying that you did anything wrong. We just need to know everything you saw."

She grimaced, taking out a cigarette and lighting it as she started pacing. "I've been going over it since this morning when Aunt Joyce called Mrs. Wheeler. I... I haven't gotten anything more than what I had last night."

"You talked to them last night?" Jonathan asked, and she shrugged. "No one said anything about that. Didn't wake me."

"You were tired, and it was... me being crazy again."

"You're not crazy," Joyce said, lighting a cigarette of her own. "No one doubts that you saw something last night. We're just not sure what it means."

She snorted. She didn't think there was anything that could be said besides that she was nuts. "I keep trying to... to figure it out. To get more, to make it make sense, but... it just doesn't. I... Barb dropped me off at the house. It was dark. She asked me if I wanted to stay or go with her, told me to call her if I needed anything. I didn't. I... I walked in, took the bags to the bedroom, left them on the bed, and walked back out to the porch. Had a smoke. That's when the car showed up."

"What do you remember about the car?" Hopper asked, and she rubbed her head. "Anything beyond it being black?"

"It was... big. Boxy. Like... I think it was a Ford or... something similar. Those ones all look alike. I can't tell them apart. I don't know

much about cars.”

“Ford LTD, maybe. What else?”

She swallowed. “A man got out first. He'd been driving. He asked for Mrs. Byers. I told him that was my aunt but she wasn't here. I... He wasn't local. I said that to him because if he was local, he'd have known Aunt Joyce is always working. I... I thought I heard something, and it distracted me. He got close, and I saw... her. That woman.”

“What woman?”

“I... In Sherwood, she... first she said she was a social worker. Then she was at the hospital as my nurse,” Veronica said, aware of the eyes on her. “I know it sounds crazy, okay? It... It was so wrong it had to be a dream or something... It... They told me in the hospital I was just upset, that I was wrong about her, but I know she came to the door before the fire, and... I... would swear she was there last night, but she... She drugged me. There's nothing after that until Will wakes me, freaking out because there's something in the house...”

“Something,” Hopper repeated, frowning at her. “Not someone? Not these people you saw before?”

Veronica wrapped her arms around herself. “It was... fuzzy. I felt... strange. The drugs... I could barely think... It was like that night on the lawn at the house in the fire but... it wasn't... and I... he was scared, and he begged me not to let that thing get him, and I was... I could barely move... and it... It didn't have a face... it didn't look right... like... I don't even know... I told Will to use the window and then...”

“What?”

“The lights flickered and he was gone,” Veronica said, biting her lip. “I don't... there's nothing else. He was just... gone.”

17. Chapter 17

Summary for the Chapter:

Nine looks for Veronica.

The search for Will continues.

Notes for the Chapter:

This got a bit long. I wanted to have that scene at the end where it is, but I wasn't prepared for how much had to go into Veronica trying to explain what happened when Will was taken or how long it took Nine to learn where Veronica was.

October 3

“Wake. We are there.”

He looked over at Eight and groaned. He had slept, much longer and later than he'd intended to, and if they went as far as he'd paid for, they'd gone too far. He knew Eight didn't know that, though, as he had not told her where he was actually going. He told her too much and yet he supposed not enough at the same time.

He tried to rise, and he almost cried out the pain was so bad. Eight covered his mouth, the way they had sometimes done when they were children and the so-called games they played ended up hurting. They weren't supposed to cry or complain, even in the rainbow room.

“Shh,” she said. “It will pass.”

He nodded, knowing it would but it still made him want to fall over.

She picked up his bag, following him to the front of the bus and down the stairs at the front, getting off and out into the city. “Where are we?”

“Toledo.”

He frowned. He'd paid to go as far as Cleveland, and he didn't think this one went to Toledo.

“I got a map at one of the other stops,” she said. “I found Sherwood, and I figured out where we could go that was closest without being noticed. Toledo isn't Chicago, but it's size is decent enough, and we will get lost in the crowds.”

“Kali,” he said, giving her a pointed look. “You're a dark skinned girl with weird hair and strange clothes. You're going to get noticed wherever we go.”

“Like your trench coat isn't a statement.”

“It... says I like dark stuff and pockets,” he agreed, feeling a bit confused again. She smiled at him, taking his arm and leading him away from the bus. “I can take it off and people don't notice as much, but they don't even notice me that much with it.”

She shrugged. “I can make illusions if I have to.”

“You might have to. They're already giving us looks. Bud wasn't... he didn't... he was a bit of... he told me once that only people with light skin like us belonged together and I'd better not so much as look at anyone with dark skin because that was only trouble. I think these people agree with him.”

She rolled her eyes. “Idiots.”

He shook his head, forcing them forward. She'd be a lot less noticeable without the hair and the clothes, and he'd put his coat on her if she'd take it because she would be less visible that way. He was hard to spot most times, just some ordinary kid, and that worked for him until the rare times it didn't and he either got mistaken for one of those boys or some other troublemaker. She was different, and different was a problem in smaller places, and even this place didn't seem big enough for whatever it was they disliked about her.

“We'll need a car or a cab,” she said. “You have money for one?”

He did, but he didn't say so, walking over to the convenience store and inside. He made himself a cherry slushie first, missing Veronica all over again, and then he grabbed things from the shelf he liked to eat, a lot of them, enough to make her eyes widen in disbelief.

“You have money for all of this?”

He did, for now, and he wanted it. Now that he'd finally slept, he knew he had to eat. “Did you want a drink?”

“What are you doing?”

“Need to eat. You know that. Anything we do takes energy.”

She nodded, grabbing a large cup and filling up with every flavor of soda on the menu. She set it down next to his food and he took out a bill to pay for it all. The only part of Bud he'd really miss was the money, the freedom that came with it to do whatever he needed or wanted.

“Put the food in my bag,” he said as they left the store. “And I think I can carry it now if you're going to complain.”

She snorted. “I get the feeling you'd leave me behind if I didn't have it, and you're still weak.”

“Why are you still here?”

“You think I want to miss a chance at that agent?” Kali asked. “Not on your life. If she's there, I want to make her pay. That is my path. I heal my wounds by making those that hurt me pay.”

Something about that seemed wrong to him, but he didn't know what it was so he didn't say anything. “If that's what you want, fine, but we're making you... less visible first.”

“I can create illusions.”

“You want to do that all day?” he asked, frowning. “Because we'd need it for the entire cab ride and probably more.”

“You don't know how to drive, do you?”

Bud was supposed to teach him as a part of that bet he'd lost, but he'd lost it, so he didn't know. Bud hadn't trusted him enough before, and it wasn't that necessary when he wasn't this drained. He could move almost anywhere when he firewalked.

"Damn, Nine. How did you ever last this long?"

"Men who wanted my body and then Bud."

She grimaced. "We really have to teach you to be a lot less literal. That was a rhetorical question. And no, don't ask. I'll explain."

"Stop eating all my food," he said, and Kali flipped him off, emptying the bag into her mouth. She closed her eyes and moaned, and he again regretted not doing something to her sooner. He could have burned her off the bus or something.

He had been weak, but he could have done *something*. He didn't like being stuck with her, didn't want to spend his money on her.

"I had to maintain that illusion for our entire trip," she reminded him. "That cab driver thinks he took two businesspeople from Toledo to this hellhole, and that's because of me. I'm starving."

"And bleeding," he said, pointing to the bit below her nose that betrayed her use of her ability.

"We're going to need a bit more than this. You were here before, and they probably still have people here looking for you," she reminded him. "I can't influence everyone, especially if we're moving."

He nodded, shrugging out of his coat, pulling out one of the red shirts that was his least favorite and pulled it on over his other shirt. He stopped, leaning against the building as the pain flared up.

She looked him over. "You're right. You do look different with only a change of clothes. Less threatening. More... wholesome."

He had no idea what that word was. He was going to buy himself a dictionary and start reading it in his spare time if he lived past finding Veronica. "You don't. You need something less... noticeable."

I'd send you shopping, but you'd have to use your ability again, you're already tired, and we're going to need you to do more. Put this on."

She rolled her eyes. "This is—"

"And do this," he said, pulling her hair down so that it looked less crazy and dangerous, covering over the part that was shaved close to her head. He didn't know how she could want to wear her hair like that when she was free. He would never let anyone shave his head again.

"This isn't going to change anything."

He rolled his eyes. "You think I don't know that? If you could give people an illusion over the phone, I'd have had you do that and left you behind a long time ago, but you can't, and they didn't even tell you if she was at the hospital over the phone."

"I know that," Kali said, just as frustrated as he was. "I could probably do it with more practice, but it's never been necessary before, so I didn't bother. Now I should, but it won't help us here."

"No, but if we can find out if Veronica's here, I can do the rest."

Kali frowned. "You keep saying that, but you—I don't suppose you realize that a fire in a hospital would be a huge inferno, do you? With that equipment and the oxygen and—"

"I know," he said. He'd seen something similar before, and it was but wasn't his fault. "Bud had me burn one down once. It was... one of the biggest fires I've ever made. I almost lost control of it. He was not happy."

"I don't like this Bud of yours."

He shrugged. "They killed him, so it doesn't matter. What does matter is getting Veronica."

"More food," Kali said. "And I'll consider changing clothes."

“Focus it on her, there at the desk.”

“I know what I'm doing,” Kali muttered, irritated with him, and he glared back at her. He was sore and tired and hungry because she ate everything, including half the meal he'd gotten for himself at the restaurant before they came over here. Plus he'd had to pay for her food and that overpriced outfit of hers which wasn't that much better than what she wore before, still getting too much attention.

He followed her up to the desk, leaning against it as she spoke, her voice sounding a lot more like the type of people she was making them seem to the nurse working there.

“We're looking for Veronica Sawyer. She should be a patient here.”

The papers had told them that she'd been brought here afterward, but not much else, and he really didn't like it because he knew that they had to be watching the hospital, too. They'd shot him, and they probably expected him to show up here, wounded.

“Miss Sawyer was released two days ago.”

“Released?” he asked, confused, and Kali gave him a look of warning. He reminded himself not to talk as he waited. She had the right voice. He didn't, and it would be suspicious, even if the rest of her illusion worked.

“Yes, released. Her aunt took her home with her.”

Kali looked like she wanted to swear as much as he did. “Would this aunt be a blond woman about five five—”

“Oh, no, no,” the nurse said. “Spookiest thing ever, wouldn't you know? Her aunt looks just like her. Different hair, a bit older, but almost carbon copy. Strangest thing I've ever seen, and I've worked in this hospital half my life.”

That was weird, and if Eight wasn't right next to him, he'd think maybe they used her to fool the staff, but they couldn't have. He nudged her.

“The aunt's name?”

“Joyce Byron. No, that's not it. Byson... Something with a B and a Y. My memory's not what it once was.”

“And where does she live?”

“It was pretty far,” the nurse said, tapping her chin as she thought. “Hmm. I... Oh, yes, I remember now. I thought, 'you poor thing, what a drive you just made, you must be exhausted,' and she did, she looked very run down. It was... Hawking, Indiana.”

“Hawkins, Indiana?” Kali repeated, and he knew she felt as sick as he did at those words.

“Yes, that's it. That sounds right.”

He looked back at the hallway, seeing the man at the end looking at them again instead of his newspaper. He tugged on Kali's arm, pulling her toward the door. She hurried with him, and they started running as soon as they were outside the door, weaving through buildings until they had a spot at the end of an alley to hide in.

“Hawkins,” she said. “You were right. They have her.”

He nodded, waiting to see if anyone came by looking for them. “I know.”

“I can't go back there,” Kali said. “I won't.”

“I never said you had to,” he reminded her. He was going, but she didn't have to. He had to get Veronica back, but she was nothing to Kali. “You can go back home, back to your friends. I have to go after her.”

“You won't make it. That town is too small. They'll see you. They'll be watching for someone driving in or taking a cab or—”

“I don't need any of that.”

She frowned. “You're not making any sense.”

He smiled at her. “You want to see something really impressive?”

November 7

"I am starting to think you should not be in control of this project at all," Dyer said, her arms folded over her chest as she faced Brenner. "There is something loose from that hole. It took your scientist. Eleven is missing. Nine is still out there. And a boy has also gone missing, taken by a man without a face."

Brenner glared at her. "We do not have time to argue about who is at fault or who should be in charge. Right now, that remains me, and we need to contain this situation as quickly as possible."

"It's already almost past containment. Our attempts to discredit the girl have come under too much scrutiny, and she saw that thing last night when it took the boy. She told them about our visit."

Brenner shook his head. "You let yourself be seen by her a third time and yet feel that I'm the incompetent one? You knew what she'd do if she saw you, didn't you? You're giving her credence, not doubts. She sees more proof of the conspiracy in you. And exactly what did you do about the sheriff?"

"Chief of police," Dyer corrected. "We drugged his beer and took the samples he acquired of her medication."

"And that is handling it to your mind?"

"I was stalling, remember? You wanted one more experiment—which backfired spectacularly—and I was just supposed to keep things up and running until that was done. I was well within those guidelines with what I did. The delay and drink would have made the cop look like an ass, and everyone accepted the girl's raving as a dream until they realized the boy was actually missing. And that is not on me. That's your mistake. Again. You let that thing into this world, and it took a child. This isn't going to go away any time soon."

Brenner pinched his nose. "A boy's disappearance easily has no connection to us."

"Except that people believe the girl's boyfriend may have been

involved,” Dyer said. “Meaning they’re looking for him. For Nine. Who shouldn’t even exist in their minds.”

“Get what information you have on the missing boy. If that thing took him, he’s dead, and that’s all they need to know. They’ll drop it as soon as they’re given some proof of that fact.”

“And how do we give them that?”

Brenner swore sometimes he was surrounded by morons. “With a body, of course. We can make sure one gets found to end that angle, and you can still spring your trap on Nine and eliminate him as soon as that is done. I want to know what you’re doing to find Eleven.”

“We’re listening to all communications and organizing our own search, putting our people out as volunteers in among those who will be looking for the boy.”

“That’s a start, but hardly enough, not with Nine out there.”

“You think he’ll help her? He shouldn’t even remember her. She doesn’t remember him or any of the others.”

“Eleven was younger than the rest of them. Nine was older, and their minds are not like those of ordinary toddlers. Nothing about those children is normal. It is very possible he remembers her and would take her away from us or even kill her.”

“I’ll make sure the teams are aware and shoot to kill.”

“You said he was just... gone?” Joyce asked, her heart sick with the words, trying not to lose everything as she heard her niece’s words. Will. Gone. Her baby. She had to find him. She had to get to him back. He was lost, maybe hurt, maybe taken.

Veronica nodded. “Yes. That’s it. That’s all I remember.”

Hop watched her. “How do you mean, gone? Like that thing that was in the house took him and ran with him?”

Veronica swallowed. “I... no. Not... like that. They... they were there

and then... gone. And... I don't remember getting up, or anything, but I must have or something. I... the window was open, right, Jonathan? When you got home, my window was open."

"Yeah, it was. You were going to freeze, lying on top of your covers, and I closed the window and covered you on my way to the shower," he said. You... woke up then, we talked a bit, you told me about... I thought it was a dream."

"We all did," Joyce told him, not wanting him to blame himself, either. "So, the window was open, but you don't remember opening it?"

Veronica shook her head. "No. I didn't... I... I think maybe I screamed when Will was gone... I don't know. There's nothing after him disappearing until Jonathan woke me the second time. It was... I started thinking I dreamed it all, but it's so foggy... I do feel like I was drugged but that can't be real..."

"Sometimes our minds play tricks on us. We see things we don't want to see, ones that scare us. Or we see things we want to see because we want them too much," Hop said, and Veronica frowned at him. "Men I knew in 'Nam. They see that place all the time, and it's not somewhere you want to be. And I... I used to see my daughter. All the time. I'd see Sara. I'd hear her. I wanted to believe she was there so badly even after she was gone."

"So I'm just crazy," Veronica said. "Nothing we didn't know before, but this... it doesn't help you find Will."

"It might," Hop said, taking that tone of his that was almost gentle. "I need to ask you about your boyfriend."

"What boyfriend?" Jonathan asked, sounding confused. "She doesn't have a boyfriend here. No one talks to her besides Barb and Nancy and only in the last few days."

"This guy is from before Hawkins," Hop said. "Though he might have followed her here."

Jonathan frowned. "You think he... that this guy who likes Veronica

took Will? How? Why? And why wouldn't she know him if he did? She said it was a man without a face?"

"I don't think she wants to believe it was him," Hop said, watching Veronica. "She still cares about this kid, doesn't want to see it, but he might even have been responsible for the fire that killed her parents."

Jonathan looked shaken, and Joyce reached for him, wanting to comfort him even if he rarely let her. She should have said something before, but she hadn't wanted to believe that Veronica's boyfriend was behind her sister's death, even if it was possible. Veronica didn't need that kind of guilt, though she seemed to be carrying it anyway.

"No," Veronica said, her voice firm and resolute. "He did not kill them."

"You may not want to believe he did, but that was not a gas main explosion," Hop said. "And those burns you have didn't come from a house fire—"

"He didn't kill them," Veronica insisted. "It wasn't him. I know it wasn't. They... he... Oh, God. They're listening. They heard... They'll kill all of you... and it'll be my fault... again..."

She ran for the door, shoving it open and going out onto the porch. Hop started after her, swearing under his breath as he did. Joyce followed, knowing she couldn't let him spook Veronica further. She could run down the road and into traffic or out into the woods again, and she couldn't let that happen again, not when Will was already missing.

Hop caught Veronica by the arms, and she screamed when he got hold of her, a horrible reenactment of when Lonnie had her.

Joyce ran up, and Hop passed Veronica to her, still blocking her path but not holding her. The girl shook, starting to weep in her arms. Joyce rocked her, shaking her head. This couldn't be happening. Her son was missing, and her niece had seen something, but she couldn't tell them.

Hop knelt down next to her. "Just give me a name. I'll make sure it

wasn't him, and we'll keep looking for Will. I won't stop that. We're going to find him, but I need to make sure it wasn't your boyfriend. That he had nothing to do with this."

"You're not listening to me," Veronica said, lifting her head again. "It wasn't him. He didn't do this. He wouldn't..."

"Then let me prove it. Give me his name."

She shuddered again. "He doesn't have one."

"He doesn't have a name?" Jonathan demanded. "How can he not have a name? If he has Will—"

"He doesn't," Veronica insisted. "That was not him last night. He wouldn't... he would hurt anyone that hurt me... but not Will. Not you. He knows you take care of me, feed me and take me to school, and he... he wouldn't..."

Joyce frowned. "I thought you said you didn't see him again."

"They said he couldn't have been the one in the bathroom," Veronica said, shaking again. "I don't know what's real anymore... I wanted it to be him because I thought he was dead, but they said it wasn't, and he... I know what he said then... but I don't know if he was there..."

"Damn it," Jonathan said, and Joyce looked at him. That wasn't helping any. None of this was.

"You said your parents wouldn't let you see him," Hop said. "That sounds like a reason he might hurt them. That he might have set the fire."

"He didn't kill them," Veronica repeated. "They were dead before the fire started."

"Jesus," Hop whispered, and Joyce knew he was thinking Veronica did it, again. She looked over and saw Powell and Callahan coming back into the yard, both of them running toward them.

"It wasn't him. It was... our fault, but... I didn't..."

“Chief?”

Veronica shrieked as the men got close, and Joyce could hardly keep her still.

“Back off,” Hop said. They frowned at him. “I need both of you to back off, now. She saw something last night, but she's a bit confused right now.”

Veronica whimpered into Joyce's shoulder.

“Let's get her back in the house,” Hop said, but Veronica shoved away from Joyce and took off running as soon as he said it. “Damn it.”

“Hop,” Joyce said. “Stay back this time. Please.”

“Exactly what did she see?” Powell demanded, and Hop sighed. He still hadn't gotten a halfway decent answer to that. She'd seen someone in the house, he was sure of that much, but he couldn't get more than that from her in this state.

“Someone was here last night,” Jonathan said. “He took Will.”

Callahan frowned. “You sure about that?”

“Veronica saw something,” Jonathan said, getting angry. “And yeah, I know, she looks like she's crazy right now, but she saw someone or something, and Will was there. I told her it was a dream. Mom told her it was a dream. Even he did.”

“You were here last night, Chief?” Powell asked, frowning. Hop wanted to have a few words with Jonathan about that, since he'd said way too damned much. “Why?”

“I had some questions about the fire in Ohio. I figured Lonnie's lawyer would try and use it against the girl, and I wanted to be clear on what happened.”

“And... what happened?” Callahan was also frowning, arms folded over his chest.

“Official word is a gas main explosion.”

Powell studied him. “That mean you have some unofficial theory?”

Hop did, but it was going to be hard to prove. At this point, he was starting to doubt the boyfriend existed at all. “I’m just trying to find out what she actually saw last night, and as you can see, it is pretty touch and go. Flo said she was going to organize volunteers for a search party. Get on the radio with her and get that going. You see anything here?”

“Something weird in the one shed,” Callahan said. “Not sure what it is—”

“Mold,” Powell said. “Probably the toxic kind. I wouldn’t let anyone in there.”

Jonathan shook his head. “What? There’s no toxic mold in our shed. I was just in there and—”

“Show me,” Hop ordered. He turned to the boy. “You go help your mom get your cousin back in the house, okay?”

“There’s nothing in the shed,” Jonathan said. “I don’t—we looked in there for Will, and half my stuff is out here right now. I’m in there almost every day. There was no black mold.”

“Just relax, okay? I’ll take a look. You help your mom.”

He followed Powell and Callahan over to the shed. He’d actually been hoping to find some sign that the boyfriend was hanging around, but he hadn’t. Without that, without Veronica being able to at least give him this kid’s name, he was pretty damned stuck.

He walked back into the shed, squatting down and looking at the place Powell pointed out to him. The hell was that? It didn’t look like any mold he’d seen before.

“Weird, right?” Callahan asked, leaning over him. “Think this has anything to do with the... you know, weirdness?”

“You think the mold is making them crazy?”

“Lot of people passing through this place having issues.”

“Okay, first, Darlene never lived here, and she's the only one that was ever certifiable,” Hop said. “Whatever happened to her back in twenty-three rattled her up good, and she wasn't the same. Joyce has anxiety. That's different.”

“What about her dad?”

“Grief,” Hop said. “Jonathan says this mold wasn't there before, and I know it wasn't here that day Lonnie attacked Veronica. Get a sample of it and get it to the lab. Then get the damned search going.”

“What are you going to do?”

Hop glared at Callahan. “I'm going to check on the girl, see if there is anything at all I can get from her, and I'll meet up with you when I'm done. Now go.”

Veronica stood at the edge of the road, not sure which way to go. She never drove anywhere, and she was usually too distracted to pay attention to where she was going, so she didn't know where to go to get away.

She didn't know what to do, how to make this better unless she disappeared. If she wasn't here, would they still hurt her family? Joyce and Jonathan, they didn't deserve this. And Will...

Had they taken Will?

She knew it wasn't her pyro. He hadn't liked Will much, but he wouldn't hurt him. She was sure of that. He wouldn't do this to them. And if he was going to take anyone last night... it would have been her. He would have taken her.

“Veronica?” her aunt asked, and she turned back, ashamed when she saw the look on Joyce's face. “Oh, sweetheart. Come here.”

She shook her head. “No. I can't go back in the house. They're listening, and I said too much, and I don't know if they can hear me out here, but it was almost safe when I was just crazy, but I said too

much, and they'll kill you because I did. I have to go. I have to leave so you'll be safe."

Joyce shook her head. "No. You're not going. I don't know where Will is. I can't lose you, too. Come here."

Her aunt hugged her, and Veronica trembled, feeling guilty.

"It was my fault."

"No one blames you."

"No, you blame him, and it's not... well, it is but it isn't his fault," Veronica said, looking up at her aunt. "Promise not to say anything. Not to anyone. Not Hopper, not Jonathan. No one."

Joyce frowned. "Um... okay... yes. I won't say anything."

"No matter what," Veronica insisted. "They—he tried to get me to stick with the lie. If I had, they'd be alive, and it is my fault because I didn't, but I thought—what they did to him was wrong, and I wanted to stop them, to show him it wasn't supposed to be like that, that it could be different... I was so stupid... he was right, and I should have listened. Please. Don't let them do it to you, too."

"Do what?"

"He... he did come... that night. It... it was about the hamster. He... he just wanted me to take his hamster because he had to run away from them. I thought he meant the police or his dad... only that wasn't his father and they'd already killed him..." Veronica said, swallowing. She had to get this out. "He was tired, so I made him stay in my room. We... we only kissed. I swear we only kissed."

"Okay, but—"

"The next day, she came. The social worker who pretended to be a nurse who was here last night. She came. She... I turned her away, but he said she was with them, the people who... experimented on him, that made him fire, and he wanted to leave, but they were watching, so he was waiting for night... and then they got to my parents and convinced them he was... that he'd set the fire and killed

his father and... and so they were going to take me away, and I fought with them and went up to say goodbye... and he... my parents followed me, found out he was there, and got upset... he tried to leave, told me to accept the lie, but it was too late... the soldiers came in... and when he went to the window, they threatened to shoot him."

Joyce combed her fingers through Veronica's hair. "I don't—"

"I moved in front of him, so they wouldn't, but he told me they would shoot me and to let him go. He tried to use the window... but they shot him, and my dad got mad because they could have hit me, and they... they killed him. They shot him in the head... and my mom grabbed me, and she was crying and shaking and... I was... He set the soldiers on fire while they argued about killing us... and one of them started shooting... and I ducked... but Mom must not have... she was dead when I looked up again..."

"Oh, God."

"And I... he got me out... but I didn't see him... that woman... she was there... and she drugged me... and I don't remember after that until the hospital, but they all said I was crazy because she was a nurse and... and I couldn't tell you or anyone... I shouldn't now... but you... you think he did this... that he took Will... and he didn't... he said... he knew they... they're using me as bait for him and it wasn't safe to come near me... and if he did come, I'd be the one that was gone... not Will. That was not him last night. Please believe me. I know it sounds crazy, but it's true... and I don't want anything to happen to you or Jonathan, so please... Please don't tell anyone."

Joyce held her close. "Shh, sweetheart. It's going to be okay. We'll... we'll figure this out. We're going to find Will, and we'll figure this out."

Jonathan found his mom and his cousin sitting at the end of the driveway, his mom holding onto Veronica almost desperately. He winced, thinking about how close they could have come to losing Veronica, too, since she'd made it this far. What if there had been traffic and she'd run into it? She could have gotten really hurt.

"I think she finally wore herself out again," his mom said, looking up at him, her eyes thoroughly haunted. "She's so... lost. We're all so... lost."

"We're going to find Will," Jonathan said, kneeling down to pick his cousin up into his arms. He'd carried Will a few times, but his brother was smaller and lighter, and it was easier somehow. "Come on, Mom. You should be in the house, too."

His mom nodded. "Yeah. We... we should make the flyers we were going to make. That's important. The xerox place could close soon, and we need them up around town and..."

"Mom," Jonathan said, not sure what else to do. He couldn't do much comforting with Veronica's dead weight in his arms, and his mom was going to work herself up again. She shouldn't have to deal with this. He didn't understand why this always happened to them. Wasn't Lonnie enough to ruin their lives? Why did someone have to burn down Veronica's house and send her to them like this? Why did someone have to take Will, too?

"I'm sorry. I... I was just trying to keep doing something, you know?" his mom asked, pulling a cigarette out of her pocket and lighting it up as she walked along with him.

"They said they found mold in the shed."

"What? I know it leaks sometimes, but there's never been mold before. And I thought we fixed that last leak. Didn't we? You put your stuff out there, so you would have checked. It doesn't leak now."

He figured it always would, a little, but he'd fixed the big one not too long ago. "Not enough to worry about. Not enough for mold."

"I guess we'll have to deal with that later," his mom said. "Mold. They can't find Will, but they can find mold. Great."

Jonathan saw Hopper coming toward them across the yard. "They only started looking, Mom. And they did find his bike."

"Here, I'll take her," Hopper said as he got close. "What happened?"

"I found her by the road. It... She was... she was upset..."

"She tell you anything else?"

Jonathan watched his mom, frowning when she shook her head too fast for that to be a real answer. Damn it, whatever Veronica told her up there must have made her sound really crazy or she'd tell Hopper what it was.

"Do we know anything we can use?"

"No, but... can you show me what to look for if the house was bugged?"

Hopper stared at her. "What? Joyce, your house is not bugged."

"I know that. And you know that. But Veronica thinks it is, and she won't talk or stay in the house while she thinks that, so I need to go through the house to prove it isn't. And if I had something that looked like a bug that I could show her destroyed, it would probably help."

"She really is crazy," one of the officers said, and Jonathan glared at him.

"Lay off," Hopper said. "She was in a damned fire, Lonnie assaulted her, and someone was very likely in this house last night. She's got a right to be a little upset. Search party. Now."

"Yes, Chief."

Jonathan held open the door for Hopper to carry Veronica into the house, and he took her back into her room, stopping to look around again.

"Did you see anything in here that didn't belong last night? Anything strange?"

"The only new stuff was the shopping bag. It's... she doesn't have anything, so it's not hard to know that she got something new," Jonathan said. "Everything looks about the same except the window was open when I got in and the shopping bag is on the bed now and

not the floor.”

“Hop.”

He turned to the doorway, where Jonathan's mom was still standing.

“If this was her boyfriend... why did he take Will and not her?”

He dragged himself up from his nap, still sore but not as drained as he'd been before eating or resting. He looked around and groaned. It had gotten dark. He was late. So late. If he waited much longer, someone would come for Eleven, and he needed to do something now, before they reached her.

He opened a bag of chips and ate as he walked along. He was far from at his best, but he could do this, or at least he'd give a good show of it. A large fire, a firewalk, and he could get Eleven away from them. That would be enough. He could pull off one of those.

He might not do anything else, but he couldn't leave Eleven with those bastards. And the cook who'd found her today was not safe.

Besides, if he had Eleven, he might actually be able to do something to help Veronica. Eleven was a success, not like him, so it could be enough, unlike trying to do this on his own.

He made his way back toward the diner. He wouldn't mind getting some more food while he was out. He could still use more energy, more healing. He would gladly return to sleep, but he knew he couldn't. Veronica was in trouble, her cousin was, too, and now Eleven.

He didn't think he liked caring about people. That made him have to do things he didn't want to, but for different reasons from before, when it was forced on him or traded for money and shelter. This was not like that, but it still felt unpleasant. He wanted to make it stop, but he didn't know how.

He stopped to lean against a tree, needing a bit of rest before pushing himself the rest of the way to the diner. He watched a car pull into the lot and frowned. That kind of car... others drove them, he knew

they had to, but they almost always had them. He didn't like this.

He watched as the blonde walked up to the diner, all smiles, and she got let inside while other men went around to the back. He started to back away, knowing it was already too late for him to do anything. If he'd gotten here before the woman, maybe, but all he'd do now was get himself shot. Oh, sure, he could burn the diner down, but that didn't mean that would do any good. Eleven couldn't firewalk. She'd be trapped, and as much as he wanted the blonde dead, he wouldn't kill Eleven and the cook just to get at her.

The back door burst open and a blur in yellow sped out of it, running into the woods. He saw it pass him and swore, knowing he was in no state to run after her, and calling after her would bring them down on him.

He'd set a fire as a distraction, but it would only tell them he was here and make them more determined, so fuck that. He forced himself forward, following her into the trees. She wasn't hard to spot, that bright yellow giving her away everywhere.

He dodged and weaved through the woods, cursing her under his breath the entire time. She was too damned fast for him tonight.

The sky boomed, and rain started coming down hard. He shook his head. Screw this.

"Eleven, wait," he called after her, hoping they were far enough from the blonde and her men that no one would hear them. "Eleven, it's Nine. Stop, please. I can help you. I know somewhere safe."

She looked back toward him but kept running, and he sighed, forcing himself after her, slipping through the wet grass and leaves, stumbling and landing hard. He scrambled up, hurrying after her, trying to keep the yellow in sight even as it got darker with the storm.

He saw her skid to a stop, and he thought he'd finally caught a break when a flashlight caught her in its beam. He leaned back against a tree, frowning as three boys started to argue about what to do with her.

Damn it. That had not gone well at all.

Will shivered, pulling his vest around him tighter, though it barely helped. This place was freezing, and he still couldn't figure out how to get out of here and back home. He felt sick, too, and he was so tired, running as far as he could looking for a way out and not finding one. He finally gave up and walked back toward his own house. He didn't know what else to do. If that firemaker was still there, he'd at least have something to keep him warm, right?

Or maybe the monster was dead. That was a bit much to hope for, but it didn't like the fire, and that guy in the trench coat could make it somehow and use it against the monster, so if he fought it, maybe he did kill it.

He walked up to the house and frowned, seeing a large black circle surrounding it, like someone—the fire mage. Whoever Trench Coat was, he'd created fire like a sorcerer or something, so that made him a fire mage. And he'd probably be chaotic, hopefully chaotic good but neutral would be okay and more likely since he'd let Will go and stopped the monster when he'd also threatened him. So a chaotic neutral fire mage. Random, unpredictable, but not necessarily evil or violent.

He followed the circle, thinking that it might work as some kind of protection ward, the way the ground was seared all around, making the dead vines wither up like they really were dead. Man, he hoped that guy was still around here somewhere.

The ground all around the house was scorched, and he could see a few other places where fire had landed, like the battle had gone outside of the circle at one point or other.

That made sense, didn't it? If it was Will, and he was doing this as a part of a campaign, he'd have set up the ward and fought behind it, knowing the fire would keep the monster back from doing any real damage.

That was good.

Only... where was the fire mage if that was what he'd done?

Will grimaced. He didn't know, but he didn't want to stay out here alone. He opened the back door and went inside. "Hello?"

He thought for a second he heard voices, ones that sounded almost like Jonathan and his mom. He ran down the hall, looking in each room, but the whole house was empty. He was the only one here.

He shook his head. There had to be something. Someone. A way out of here.

He went to the phone and picked it up, wondering if he could get a hold of anyone here. It started ringing, and he heard static crackle over the line.

"Hello? Hello? Lonnie?"

That was his mom. He could hear her. How was he hearing her? How had he gotten a hold of her?

"Hopper? Who is this? Will?"

He tried to speak, but nothing came out, and then he thought he heard it again. That creature. The demogorgon was back. He looked around for it, but if it was out there, it was too far away for him to see it. Maybe it was stuck on the other side of the ward.

"Will?" his mom demanded. "Who is this? What have you done to my boy?"

"Mom, it's me," he tried to say, but the phone sparked and died, almost burning him, and he dropped it, sitting down against the wall and giving into the tears.

18. Chapter 18

Summary for the Chapter:

Nine has a delay in going after Veronica.

Things are tense around the Byers house after the unsettling phone call.

Notes for the Chapter:

I got to this point and was asking myself what I thought I was doing. I knew what I want to do for parts of this, but there's other bits that I don't know at all, and the fallout from the phone call was hard to do and also longer than expected and I am feeling like everyone's out of character...

I swear, I am such an insecure, idiotic little writer.
sigh

And I so should be sleeping because overnight shift again.

October 3

Kali fell back with a groan, rolling over and telling herself she was never listening to Nine again. She still did not know why she'd bothered following him beyond that first stop on the bus. Her life was here. Her friends were here. She was making progress on those that had hurt her, and she did not need any of the others. She did not need Nine.

She had her friends, good friends, protectors who had helped her, healed her and fought with her, and they were enough.

And yet... they could never understand what it was like in the

rainbow room, what it was like to fear failure, to be an experiment, to have gifts that people feared and wanted hidden.

Too dangerous to live.

That was Nine. She sat up and looked over at him, knowing that if the lab had any idea what he was capable of, they'd have killed him long ago.

“What was that?”

He grimaced, barely moving. “I call it... firewalking... I can move... through the fire... to somewhere... else... come out of the red... almost anywhere...”

“How far have you gone before?” Kali asked, watching him. If he could do that, he could get them almost anywhere, and the fire only seemed to be the way to start or open what he did, not how they came out. Nothing here was burning.

He could get into Hawkins without them knowing. Might not be able to get out, but he could definitely get in.

“Woke up... in Texas once,” he said, rolling over. “Kind of... confusing.”

She nodded, though she was tempted to snort. “I bet. How often can you do that?”

He shook his head, closing his eyes. “Takes... too much... do twice... big fire... lots of energy... hurts... worse than anything... well... no. Not everything... I... there are worse things. Very tired now... and hungry... mostly tired.”

“Can you take people with you every time?”

“Only tried twice,” he said, forcing himself up and reaching for his bag. He reached in and pulled out the hamster ball. “This one... made it three times now... good.”

“You are way too attached to that rat.”

“Hamster.” He laid back down with it in his arms. “Bud said... no dog... moved... too much... hamster... first thing... liked me... didn't hate... for being... monster... special.”

“You sound like you're getting worse.”

“Hurts a lot,” he said. “Shouldn't have... done... but need get... Veronica... need leave...”

“You picked a poor way of doing that,” Kali said, going over to help him up. “And after I told you I was not going to Hawkins—I can't believe I agreed to this. That was stupid of me, and I try very hard not to be stupid. I am careful, or I was until I saw you again. I don't know... it was so strange seeing you again, like a nightmare. You've changed, but I still knew it was you.”

Knew, and felt like a part of her that was missing was now back. She had purpose, and it had been enough before, but now she had him. She forced him up and frowned as she looked at the building in front of them. Impossible.

“This is not Hawkins.”

“Took you home,” Nine whispered. “Go... your friends.”

She shook her head. “I am not leaving you or your rat out here like this. Come inside.”

“He's awful white to be your brother,” Axel said, but Kali ignored him. She set Nine's bag on the table, the ball with the hamster next to it. Nine was a fool to be attached to such a thing with the kind of life they led, but from what little she knew, he'd had it worse than she had when he escaped. She'd at least found a family for a time, a good life, until she'd been forced to flee, losing everything she cared about.

Now she had friends. She had a purpose. Her friends were fighters. She did not worry about them the same way she had her family. They'd been defenseless. Not so these she had now.

“Lay off, Axel,” Mick said. “Not everything is what it looks like. Kali says he's her brother, he's her brother.”

"He looks dead." Axel leaned over his bag. "He got anything good in there?"

"Leave it," Kali said. She was still tired from using her own abilities, all the energy she'd used to create illusions to get them to Sherwood undetected and find out where his friend was. She had a feeling this girl might be more than a friend to Nine, but he seemed a bit confused as to what that meant, and she'd been trying to keep her distance.

She'd intended to kill the blonde if she saw her. She hadn't seen any agents this time that she recognized. She knew they'd been there. They had to be watching the house and the hospital, trying to find Nine. The girl was bait. They must have been watching.

Kali knew they should not be free now.

"Let him rest," she said. "And do not touch his things."

"A hamster?" Axel asked, lifting up the ball. "Who the hell keeps a hamster?"

Kali reached over and took the ball from him. "He does, and he is more dangerous than you can imagine. Leave his things alone."

Mick frowned. "Is he... like you?"

"Yes," Kali admitted. "And... no."

She turned away from Nine, troubled. He'd risked his life—and, it would seem, hers—to get them back here, and all because she'd said she would not return to Hawkins with him. He was still going, would return for the girl as soon as he could, probably as soon as he was awake and fed.

"What's wrong?" Funshine asked, the big man still attuned to her mood better than anyone, even Mick. She hated how well he saw her, but then her illusions could not hide everything, not when her friends knew her and she had not thought to disguise her emotions. "Kali?"

"You left in a hurry," Mick reminded her. "You barely said anything when you did. Just that you thought you saw someone and would be

back. You were gone for hours.”

“This is the guy, right? The one you saw?”

Kali nodded. “My brother.”

“He's in trouble,” Funshine said. “We can help.”

She shook her head. “Not with this.”

He dragged himself up and groaned, regretting waking and knowing that taking Kali home like he had was a mistake. Maybe he thought he'd convince her she could help if he showed her what he could do. He could just have taken her to Hawkins. He knew that.

He also knew he'd been through too much that he didn't want, that people didn't ask him about, to do that to others. He was a monster, but he was going to be a polite one, one that got smarter and did things better, one that could be worth the admiration Veronica had for him, because he knew he wasn't.

He'd stay far away from her if he thought it would help, but he couldn't do that until she was safe, and he didn't think she was. She was in trouble because of him. He should never have tried to give her Slushie, but he'd had to run, so he'd tried to give the hamster a safe place.

He looked over into the bag, seeing his clothes but not Slushie's bright ball. He looked around in a panic, not sure what had happened to him. He checked his coat pocket. The money was still there, or at least it felt like it was.

“Relax,” Kali said as she came toward him. “Your stuff is safe. As are you. You brought me home, remember?”

He shrugged and regretted it as pain went through his body. This place she had was not on a map, not that the red had maps. It was not like that, though he couldn't explain it well himself. He needed to know more, but he didn't want to at the same time. That was like experimenting, and he was done with experiments now. He was free. He would stay free.

"Kali didn't know what this little one's name was," a big black man said, coming toward them, the hamster barely visible in his hand. "He's been entertaining us."

"Because some people are easily amused," a kid with spiky hair said. "That little rat ate better than we did."

"Axel," Kali said, shaking her head. "Funshine has taken a shine of his own to your hamster, Nine. He fed it, watered it, and cleaned its ball."

"Slushie," he said, wondering if he could leave the hamster with the big man if he really did like him so much. Then again, Slushie was Veronica's now, wasn't he?

"You named the hamster Slushie?"

"I like slushies," he said, easing himself up. He reached into his pocket and took out a cigarette, using his lighter to start it since he hurt too much to do it the other way. "And he doesn't look like a teddy bear."

Kali laughed. "You and being literal. You know that's not what I meant."

He shrugged. "Food?"

"Told you, buddy. Your hamster ate it all."

He gave that guy the middle finger, still watching Kali. "I need to eat so I can go."

"You're going to get yourself killed."

He knew that, but he wasn't going to stop, either. He couldn't. Not when it was about Veronica. "I told you. You don't have to come. I can go alone."

Spikey hair snorted. "What, you and the hamster are some kind of army or something?"

"Or something," he said with a slight smile, making Kali laugh. He

reached into his pocket and took out the bill, passing it to her. "Food."

"You had a hundred bucks in your pocket this entire time?" the spiky haired one asked, coming toward them. "Kali, what the hell? Your brother has money, and we're sitting here starving and you don't think maybe we could have used that a little?"

"What Nine has is his to share or not," she said. "Though I should say my price for getting you food is half."

He took out another bill. "Half."

"Okay, where did you get all that money?"

"It's none of your business, Axel."

"Bullshit, Kali. He's got more money there than we've seen in weeks, and you're telling me to ignore it?" Axel demanded. He shook his head. "No. He is sharing more than half."

"Come off it, Axel," the girl with the poofy hair said as she came closer. "Kali said he didn't have to share, and you wouldn't if it were you."

"That's a lot of money, and judging from his pocket, he's got more. He can spare a little for us since we took him in."

"Axel, if you don't stop this, you'll upset him, and if you upset him, you'll understand why I told you he was dangerous," Kali said. "I told you—Nine's money is his own. Let it go."

Funshine put a hand on Axel's shoulder. "She's right. Leave it be."

Axel pulled away, glaring at him. "First she disappears with him, then she shows back up again, says he's her brother, and now he's got money he's not sharing and we're just supposed to accept all that just because?"

"I could light your hair on fire if you need a better reason," he told him, leaning against the table and taking another drag of his cigarette. This would hurt, but it would be worth it.

“Yeah, sure, I bet you—”

“Holy shit, Axel,” the girl with the big hair said. “Your hair—the tips... It’s on fire. Kali, that’s you, right? You did that. He’s not really on fire, is he?”

“Nine,” Kali said. “Put it out.”

He smiled. “Do you have a camera?”

“Nine, put it out. You could really hurt him.”

“So? He’s irritating and obnoxious and look at him dance,” he said, enjoying the strange thing Axel was doing as he bounced around, trying to put it out, though not so much the screams.

“Nine, these are my friends. Would you do that to Veronica?”

He sighed, waving a hand and making the fire stop. “No.”

November 7

“Try and rest, Mom,” Jonathan said, sitting her down on her bed. He didn’t know what else to do after that terrible phone call. She seemed so sure it was Will, but if it was just breathing, it could have been anyone. He didn’t know what to think. He wanted to believe it was Will because that way his brother was alive, but if it was Will, why hadn’t he said anything? Why hadn’t he told them where to find him or where to look or that he was alive? And if it wasn’t Will, who would do that to them, call up and just breathe?

Unless... was it Veronica’s boyfriend? If he was stalking her like Hopper thought, then he could have done it when he realized it wasn’t her that picked up.

He pulled a blanket around his mom and went to the door, turning off the light and shutting it behind him. Maybe she would sleep. He hoped she would, or she’d just get worse.

He went back into the kitchen, needing a drink before he tried to sleep himself.

“You must feel like you're the parent,” Veronica observed from the table, almost making him jump. “Stuck taking care of all of us.”

He did, but he didn't want to admit that, not to her. He went to the fridge and took out the juice, setting it on the counter while he got down a glass. “You really think you should be smoking in the house?”

“I think that smoking in the house is the least of my problems, don't you?” Veronica asked, shaking her head as she blew out smoke. “I'm so crazy I lost your brother, and you're going to worry about me smoking?”

Jonathan winced. “Was it your boyfriend?”

“No. If it was, I'd be gone, not Will.”

That was what his mom had said earlier, and Jonathan believed it, at least in part. It didn't make sense for the stalker to leave Veronica behind when he could have taken her.

“I ruin everything I touch,” Veronica said, rubbing at her forehead. “I... What happened? With the phone? It... it's burned black.”

“I don't know,” he admitted. “Mom thought it was Will, but whoever it was just breathed at her, and then it sparked and died and she was screaming...”

“I heard that part,” Veronica said, pulling her sweater close around her, the mix of her style with his mom's an odd, ugly clash. “I don't understand. That thing... it didn't look like something that would make phone calls or demand ransoms... It didn't even... it wasn't human.”

Jonathan grimaced. “Veronica—”

“I'm insane. Forget it.” She rose and went down the hall, shutting her door behind her.

He winced. He didn't know if she was crazy or not, but he wished he

knew what she knew about his brother. He wanted to find Will, needed to, for everyone's sake, not just his mom's or Veronica's or even Will's, but his own.

November 8

"All right, Mom," Jonathan said, trying to put food in front of Joyce. "Breakfast is ready."

"What?" Joyce asked, looking up from the papers on the table. She moved to cover them, not wanting them damaged. "No, be careful of the poster."

"Yeah, okay," Jonathan said, pushing the plate toward her. "All right."

"I can't eat," Joyce said, knowing she hadn't had anything yesterday, either, not since those bites of toast in the morning, but she couldn't do it. She couldn't stand the thought of anything when her son was missing. All the idea of food did was make her sick.

"I just need you to eat, Mom."

Jonathan was so good to her, better than she deserved, but she couldn't do that for him, as much as she knew she should and he wanted her to and he was worried. He would always worry, and she was never going to be able to be what he really needed because she was such a mess.

"Listen. Listen, the Xerox place opens in, like," she checked her watch, "thirty minutes."

"Yeah."

"And I don't want you to go alone—"

"No, I know," Jonathan said. "I told you—I got it."

"So I'm gonna have Karen take you, 'cause I should be here," Joyce said, getting a look from him. He was old enough to do it alone, she knew that, but he shouldn't have to. "I think—"

"I'll go with him," Veronica said, and Joyce frowned as she looked at her niece. "I don't... He won't be alone, and I won't... I'm no good to you here. I can help with the posters. With putting them up. Even a crazy person can do that."

Jonathan gave her a look but nodded. "Veronica and I can do it. It's fine."

"We need to make, what, two hundred, three hundred copies?" Joyce asked, still fretting. She wasn't sure she liked sending Veronica with him. It didn't make it any better. "How much is a copy? Ten cents? If we—ten cents—"

"Mom," Jonathan interrupted, that same worried look on his face. "You can't get like this, okay?"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," she said, and he moved to comfort her, and she winced, knowing she should have been better than this.

"No, it's okay," he said, and Veronica snorted, rising from the table. She walked toward the other room and stopped. "What is it?"

"Hopper."

Joyce rose, rushing toward the door. "We've been waiting six hours. Six hours, Hop."

She'd had to go to their nearest neighbor's house to use the phone after she pulled herself together, and that was when it was still dark out, only just getting light.

"I know," Hop said, sounding subdued. He gave Veronica a glance and then looked back at Joyce. "I came as soon as I could."

"Six hours."

"A little bit of trust here, all right?" Hop asked, sounding a bit defeated. "We've been searching all night. Went all the way to Cartersville."

Cartersville? That was so far away. If Will had gone that far—but he could have, if he'd been taken—and if he wasn't—oh, hell. "And?"

“Nothing.”

“God.” Joyce hadn't really thought—she didn't know what she thought. She didn't want to have them find a body, but she wanted him home. She wanted to know there was some sign of him out there. Somewhere. Proof he was alive.

“Flo says you got a phone call?”

“Oh, yeah,” Joyce said, almost eager to show him the phone. She let him lift it up for himself to see the damage, and he frowned.

“Storm barbecued this pretty good.”

“The storm?” Joyce demanded. After yesterday, what Veronica said about bugs in the house and why the fire had happened and how her sister really died—she didn't know that it was real any longer, no more than her niece did because how did she believe part of what Veronica said and not all of it? And if that were true, if there were some kind of... monster, then maybe it did this to the phone.

“What else?”

“You're saying that that's not weird?” Joyce pointed to the burned phone. How could he deny how strange that was?

“No, it's weird,” Hop said, his eyes wandering toward Veronica again. She looked away, lighting up a cigarette.

“Can we, like, trace who made the call?” Jonathan asked. “Contact the—”

“No, it doesn't work like that,” Hopper said. He turned back to face Joyce. “Now, uh, you're sure it was Will? Because Flo said you just heard some breathing.”

“No, it was him,” Joyce said. She was sure of it. She believed that much. She'd heard her son last night. That call was from Will. “It was Will. And he was scared. And then something—”

“It was probably just a prank call, somebody trying to scare you.”

Jonathan frowned. "Who would do that?"

Hop shrugged. "Well, this thing's been on tv. It brings out all the crazies, you know. False leads, prank calls, uh—"

"Say it, why don't you?" Veronica folded her arms over her chest, annoyed. "You think it was my boyfriend stalking me again. Why won't you listen to me? It wasn't him. He wouldn't do that. I'm not even sure he knows how to use a phone, but leaving that aside, he wouldn't call. He would not call. He would not come anywhere near us."

Hop gave her a look. "Because they're listening?"

"Fuck you," Veronica said, walking away from them. Hop started after her, but Joyce grabbed his arm, stopping him.

"No, Hopper, it was not a prank," she said. "It was not Veronica's boyfriend. It was *him*."

"Joyce—"

"Come on, how about a little trust here?" Joyce asked. It hurt, having Hop, of all people, refuse to believe her. "What, you think I'm making this up?"

"I'm not saying that you're making it up. All I'm saying is it's an emotional time for you—"

"And you think I don't know my own son's breathing? Wouldn't you know your own daughter's?"

As soon as she said it, she regretted it, that look that came over his face worse than any slap for her hysteria might have been. She'd been angry and frustrated, and she hit him where she knew it would hurt. She did it on purpose, needing to make him see but also to make him pay.

"I'm not saying I won't do what I can," Hop said. "I won't be able to get the number, so even if it was Will—"

"It was."

“That call doesn't help us any.”

“Doesn't it mean you're looking in the wrong place?” Jonathan asked. “If everyone's out searching in the woods, but Will could make a phone call, doesn't that mean that we're not looking where we should?”

Hop shook his head. “I can't prove the phone call was from Will, so I need to keep everyone looking. And I'm going to keep looking. We're not giving up. We're going to find Will.”

Joyce nodded, wishing she felt like that was enough.

“When alpha particles go through gold foil,” Barb read off the card, wishing she felt like Nancy needed to do this for a reason that didn't connect to Steve Harrington. If she'd studied enough the night before, she wouldn't feel like this was necessary. “They become—”

“Unoccupied space,” Nancy answered confidently, and Barb shuffled the cards to the next one.

“A molecule that can—”

Someone snatched the card out of Barb's hands, lifting it up over their heads.

“Hey!”

“I don't know, I think you've studied enough, Nance,” Steve told her with a big grin, and Barb tried to hide her annoyance. Again, he was keeping her from her studying, and if Nancy failed this test, she'd hate herself for weeks.

“Steve—”

“I'm telling you, you know, you got this. Don't worry,” Steve said, completely missing that it was Nancy and she would still worry until she got her grade back. “Now, on to more important matters. My dad has left town on a conference and my mom's gone with him, 'cause, you know, she doesn't trust him—”

“Good call,” Tommy H said, and Barb found she knew way more than she wanted to about Steve's family now.

Steve ignored him. “So are you in?”

Nancy frowned. “In for what?”

“No parents?” Carol prompted. “Big house?”

Nancy looked at them in disbelief. “A party?”

“Ding, ding, ding,” Carol mocked, and Barb wished she could smack her.

“It's Tuesday.”

“It's Tuesday,” Carol went on, still teasing and not really hiding how mean she was being about it. “Oh, my God.”

“Come on,” Steve said, turning that smile on Nancy, the one Barb knew she was going to give into, “It'll be low key. It'll just be us. What do you say? Are you in or are you out?”

Nancy started to hesitate, which was never a good sign. “Um...”

“Oh, God,” Carol interrupted. “Look.”

“Oh, God, that's depressing,” Steve said, getting everyone to look at where Jonathan stood with his cousin, pinning a poster for his missing brother to the board.

Nancy winced. “Should we say something?”

“I don't think he speaks,” Carol said, wrinkling her nose in disgust. “I guess you would know about her, though. I hear you've become quite friendly with the resident psycho. Even dressed her up so she looks almost human.”

“Carol—”

“How much you want to bet he killed him?” Tommy asked, and Steve hit him.

“Shut up.”

Nancy walked over to Jonathan, and Barb followed her, wanting to say something to Veronica, after missing her all day yesterday and not getting through when she did call.

“I just I wanted to say, you know, um... I'm sorry about everything,” Nancy told Jonathan. “Everyone's thinking about you.”

Barb touched Veronica's arm. “Hey. I tried to call after I heard, but I couldn't—”

“I... I really wasn't up to taking any phone calls,” Veronica said, darting a look toward her cousin. “I thought I'd hit the part, you know, where you accept the crazy and a sort of... tranquility settles over you, that calm... but it was only temporary and the more posters we put up, the worse I get.”

“I'm so sorry,” Barb said, giving her a hug as Nancy assured Jonathan that they'd find Will. The bell rang, and Nancy winced.

“I have to go. Chemistry test.”

“Yeah,” Jonathan nodded. “Good luck.”

Nancy smiled at him. “Thanks.”

Jonathan watched her go, and Barb knew that she should get going, too, even if she wasn't the one with the big test. She pulled back from Veronica and gave Jonathan a smile as well.

“I think she's right. They'll find him. He'll be okay.”

Veronica shook her head. “I don't know. If you'd seen what I saw—”

“Don't.” Jonathan said, shaking his head and heading for the doors.

Barb frowned. “Veronica?”

She sighed. “I don't know, Barb. I saw a monster. They think it was the guy I knew before, the one from Indianapolis, and I don't know what to believe anymore. I think I know... and I don't. I thought... I

told... I couldn't. I probably made it all worse. I... I have to go.”

She turned and ran after her cousin, and Barb flinched as the next bell rang.

“Attention, faculty and students. At eight pm tonight, there will be an assembly on the football field in support of Will Byers and his family. All are encouraged to attend. Volunteer sign-ups for search parties are still available in the office.”

Barb gave a glance toward the doors and forced herself to class. Maybe she should make sure Veronica had a ride to that assembly.

“Why did you say that to her?” Jonathan asked as Veronica got near his car. “You told her—you don't think Will's alive, do you? You think he's dead.”

Veronica flinched. “I don't know. I don't want to believe he is, Jonathan, I really don't, but that thing I saw—it didn't have a face. And if it didn't, then it wasn't human, and even a human—if it took a boy like Will—it didn't do it for any good reason. It's a monster. One way or another, it is, isn't it? That's the only part I can be sure of because if it did take Will, it has to be a monster.”

Jonathan sighed. He put a hand to his head. “I'm sorry. I just... I can't lose him, you know? Mom can't lose him. We're all... we can't... She'd break down completely. After all Lonnie did, everything with our grandparents, with just... life. It's too much. And she loves Will so much. They're close. Closer than me and her...”

“You're the fake parent.”

“What?”

“Um... they say that when there's a single parent or even sometimes with both parents, there's a kid, usually the oldest, that steps in like the second parent. They become codependent. It's... I'm sorry. I shouldn't say that, but it's kind of... you. And your mom. She relies on you, and you are more like the parent in many ways.”

Jonathan looked at her, and she shrugged, reaching into her pocket

for a cigarette.

"I know, you're missing when I didn't talk," she said. "Hoping you can dismiss what I say because I'm a raving psycho."

"Okay, now you're getting a bit scary," he said, and she looked at him with a bit of a warped smile. "Yeah, this is weird, wanting to laugh over that."

"I think sometimes you have to laugh over anything you can," she said. "Even if it's fucked up."

Jonathan sighed, leaning back against the car. "Why do you do that, anyway?"

"I have really shitty coping mechanisms, if you hadn't noticed," Veronica said, and he looked over at her again. She shrugged. "Come on, that wasn't worth a bit of a smile?"

"I can't believe you're trying to make me feel better."

She shrugged. "I don't know what else to do. If I think too much about myself, I go crazy again. I can't think about Will because I think about the stuff I saw and how confused I am... and I go nuts. I just... I need something... sane."

"You're sure it wasn't your boyfriend? That he wasn't there?"

"Because he didn't hurt me, but took Will? That makes no sense," Veronica reminded him. She sighed. She'd told her aunt, and maybe she shouldn't have, especially with everything else Joyce was dealing with, Will gone like he was, this nightmare she couldn't wake up from and that call...

"I keep thinking about what Hopper said about that call, and I don't—why would someone do that to us? Why hurt her like that?"

"You still think it was him, don't you? That my boyfriend did it."

"If he called for you and got her—"

"We should put fliers in the next town over. Just in case. We don't

know how far he could have gone if someone took him.”

Jonathan frowned at her, and she forced a smile, promising him without words—she'd tell him everything if they were away from here, if it was safe. Maybe she could even get him to come, to meet Jonathan and show him he was not what Jonathan thought he was. He hadn't come before because it wasn't safe, but if they weren't in Hawkins, it might seem safe again.

It was worth trying, wasn't it?

And Jonathan deserved the truth.

Only the truth could get him killed, and Veronica didn't know that telling him was any kind of favor. Or that he would believe her.

19. Chapter 19

Summary for the Chapter:

Nine leaves Chicago.

Hopper finds another crime. Jonathan looks into his brother's disappearance. Nancy pulls Barb and Veronica into the party at Steve's.

Notes for the Chapter:

Again a bit long. I kept finding stuff I needed to put in, and I know there's stuff I ended up leaving out but I'm trying to make sure the important stuff gets in, and the party was something I planned on doing from the beginning... different from how it played out in my head, of course. It's never as good as it's supposed to be, as it seems to be in the mind.

I apologize for the many typos this time around. I've fixed the ones I've found but there may still be more. That will teach me to post late with a headache, right?

October 4

"I never saw someone so small eat so much," Axel observed, and Kali rolled her eyes. He'd said similar things about her before, since she could definitely eat her weight and more of food after using her abilities for long times, and Nine was no different. He was still on the thinner side, like Axel, and Kali figured he'd stay that way most of his life as long as he used his abilities.

She figured he would, since he seemed to do it for his cigarettes without even realizing he was.

"I paid for the food," Nine said. "You have no reason to complain."

He left out setting Axel's hair on fire, of course, but in part Axel was asking for it, would not have been satisfied until he saw at least one demonstration of what Nine could do, and on the whole, it was much tamer a show and yet more convincing than anything else would have been.

"These people who hurt you and Kali," Funshine said, looking up from the hamster, "you intend to go after them?"

Nine nodded. "Should be up to going soon."

"Up to going?" Mick asked, giving Kali a look. They could have driven him, that was true, but she didn't intend to, seeing as she wasn't going back to Hawkins.

"Need to make a very big fire," Nine explained with a smile this side of unnerving. He rose from his chair, crossing the room. She knew he was testing his body, trying to see if he felt strong enough to leave. He'd wanted to go the night before, but his stunt with Axel set him back a few hours and he'd fallen asleep waiting for her to come back with the food.

"You're sure about this, going alone?" Mick pressed, going over to him. "None of us does, not even Kali."

He looked at her with a frown. "Why would I not go alone?"

"Because you could have help," Mick said, looking like she was tempted to smack him. "None of us here is alone, not anymore."

He shook his head. "You are not my friends. You belong to Kali, and you shouldn't help me for Kali. I'm fire, and what I touch burns. Everyone who knows me dies. Kali can keep you safe. I can't."

Kali grimaced, once again feeling guilty for not going with him. She had friends with good hearts, fierce spirits. They would fight with her, run with her, die with her. He had nothing, in comparison, and she was almost certain he wasn't going to take the hamster with him.

"The offer stands," Funshine said. "We can help."

Nine snorted. "You are all too noticeable. Where I go, you stick out like bright neon lights. Bright, wild hair, clothes that say dangerous, and most dark skinned. No. They'd spot you in a second. I'll go alone. Can move easier that way anyway."

"You are welcome to stay," Kali said. "You will have a place with us. Always."

He looked at her. "I did not think you were naïve, Kali."

"Damn," Axel said. "You really don't think you're coming back, do you?"

Nine looked away from him. "I am going where they create the monsters, and I am the worst of them. They want me dead, have since I was old enough to remember."

"Then why go?" Mick asked. "Kali offered you a place here. You can keep the rat—"

"Hamster."

"—and help us."

"They took her. I have to go," Nine said. He turned back to Kali. "You said you hurt those who hurt you."

"I do," she agreed, too close to giving in and saying she'd go with him. "I've found a few of them, but others are hiding. Others are too dangerous to get to, like the blonde. Or Papa."

Nine shuddered at the mention of the man. "You have one of them now?"

"You said you weren't staying."

"I'm not, but I still need is a big fire. You can tell me where it should be."

"This is crazy," Mick said. "We don't do this, not fires. It's too dangerous, takes too long to set when we could just shoot them and

run.”

“What do you care?” Axel asked. “You’re staying in the car. You don’t even have to worry about getting seen or anything. You can just take off any time.”

She glared at him. “You know I wouldn’t leave you.”

He shrugged, and Kali wondered if, for all his willingness to fight, if he would run if he were in Mick’s seat. She’d never asked before, and she would not now. Mick was their driver, the best at it, and changing that position up would only end in disaster.

“None of you are necessary to this,” Nine said. “I don’t need any of you. You can all stay in the car this time.”

“Yeah, sure,” Axel said. “You and your hamster army.”

Nine looked at Funshine. “You will take care of Slushie for me? I wanted to give him to Veronica, but I don’t know what they’ve done to her or if she’ll be alive. If either of us will be alive when this is done.”

Funshine nodded, though he did not like Nine’s words about his survival. “I’ll make sure he’s safe.”

“Thank you,” Nine said. He reached into his pocket and took out more bills, giving one to Funshine. “This is for Slushie, for what he needs. And Kali...”

“You don’t have to—”

“Take this,” he said, giving her a handful. “I don’t know that I’ll live, and I can’t get more because Bud’s dead so his money is gone, but you can use this.”

“Generous,” Axel said, watching Nine with a frown.

“Not so much,” Nine said, “I still have a lot more than you do.”

He opened the door and stepped out, going up to the door to the apartment building. He left it open, pulling the fire alarm.

"The hell is he doing? He's calling them to us. They'll know something happened, that this fire wasn't an accident—if he doesn't get caught before he sets it."

Kali shook her head. They still didn't understand, even after all of their time with her. Nine did not need to set anything. He was the fire, and he would not get caught. The fire alarm was almost genius, and it would allow anyone else in there to get out, if there was anyone besides the man they wanted inside.

"This guy could get away."

"Wait," Kali said, and the others looked at her. She watched as Nine put a hand to the building, and the whole thing went up, all at once, the fire spreading like it had been everywhere all that time. It raged all over, spiking up in a vivid, dangerous looking dance.

"Holy shit," Axel said. "He did that? In seconds? With only his mind?"

"Nine is special," Kali said. "And extremely dangerous."

She raised a hand, waving to him as he disappeared into the fire. *Stay safe, brother.*

November 8

"I suppose we could take them even further," Jonathan said, looking down at the stack of the fliers. His mom had insisted on three hundred, and they had them. He'd put as many as he could around town, but Hawkins was small and most people knew Will anyway. A part of Jonathan had always figured it was stupid, putting them up, but his mom needed it and even Jonathan did, too.

At least making the fliers and putting them up had him feeling a bit useful.

He understood why his mom wanted to be doing something, but now she was at home, waiting for a call, and it might never come. What if it wasn't Will last night? What if it was someone else?

He looked back at Veronica. His cousin was smoking again, and he wanted to take the cigarette and throw it somewhere far away, but he didn't want to start a fire.

How could she like cigarettes so much after a fire?

"Veronica?" Jonathan walked toward her. "Are you—"

"I was thinking Indianapolis, too," she said, swallowing. "I just... If I tell you something, will you promise to listen to me until I'm done no matter how crazy I sound or how mad I make you?"

He frowned. "Mad?"

She looked down at her feet, walking away from him. He followed after her, confused. He still didn't know what to think of his cousin, especially now, with Will missing and this boyfriend that came out of nowhere, the one that might have taken his brother.

"Is this about the boyfriend? Were you lying about him?"

Veronica looked back at his car, swallowing, and then at him. "I... No. Not... He's not what anyone thinks. He's... You never promised you would listen no matter how crazy I sounded."

Jonathan didn't want to, but he supposed he'd better, since she had told his mom something she was keeping from everyone, and he should know what it was, seeing as he might just be more responsible than his mom—not that she did—she tried. She did, but he had to pick up a lot of slack, and right now, she was a mess. Not that he was much better, but he hadn't heard that call and wasn't sure it was Will when it was just someone breathing.

"Okay, fine. I'm listening."

"He's not... normal," Veronica began, and Jonathan frowned, not liking that as a start. "I mean... he's special. Unique. I don't think there is anyone like him... He... he can make fire with his mind."

"What?" Jonathan demanded. "He makes fire? And... you said he didn't kill your parents. Have you been lying this entire time?"

She shook her head. "No. I... yes, but if you hear me out, you'll know why. It's not what you think, Jonathan, please. I don't even know that I should tell you because... if they know I did..."

"That again? Do you have any idea how—"

"I know I sound crazy, damn it!" Veronica snapped, yelling at him. "And I have spent the last month almost sure I am, and now... I don't even... the truth is crazy, but it's still... it's what I know, and if it's right... then it's not what anyone thinks with Will because... because there really could be a monster because a world capable of creating a boy who can control fire with his mind could have real monsters, too. He thinks he's one, been told all his life that he was... only he can't be all bad because this whole thing is over a damned hamster."

"What?" Jonathan was losing patience. This was worse than his mom at her absolute lowest and even his dad drunk. "Veronica—"

"They made him in a lab, forced him to do things... to control fire. And then he got away from them and ended up at my school... and we flirted. When they found him, he fought them off, and he came to me to ask me to take in his hamster. That was it," Veronica insisted. "It was so cute and seemed so innocent and hard to believe... and I didn't, not at first, but I saw what he could do and... I made him stay because he was weak, too weak to run... and so he did, and then they found him again. Someone told them about us flirting... and they were watching us... they convinced my parents he was bad... I... we were saying goodbye when my parents walked in on us... and then... soldiers came in. He tried to leave out my window, but they shot him.... they... I'd tried to stop it... tried to block them..."

"Veronica—"

"He didn't deserve that. You don't understand, Jonathan. They hurt him... and more people did after he got free... He did... he didn't even know how bad things were, they'd screwed up his perspective so bad... and he can do dangerous things, but he was trying... you didn't see him, hear him... He... he could have set the whole house on fire and left... but he didn't... he tried to let my parents and me have the lie that he was just... a deranged kid who killed his dad in a house fire... not that Bud was his father or that he wasn't already dead

before that fire, but me... I blew it. It was my fault... if I'd just... if I'd gone along with the lie... they'd still be alive... but they killed my dad... he yelled at them for almost shooting me and... they killed him. And then... he fought against them... set them on fire... one started shooting... he killed my mom... and then there was just them and they were going to kill me, too..."

Jonathan stared at her. She was shaking and crying, and a part of him wanted to comfort her, but he was struggling too much with what he was hearing. How did he react to this? He didn't know. Veronica's story was... like something from Will's campaigns only worse, because it was supposedly here and now.

She rubbed at her cheek and swallowed. "Um... I... he got me out of the fire, and I was in my yard... that woman... they drugged me... and everything got weird... and I thought he was dead... and I was crazy because she was no longer a social worker but a nurse and I didn't get burned in the fire but I was burned and I was so confused and... I lost everything. My parents. My house. Him. I thought he was dead... I... There was... they said if he lived... he'd come back for me... so they... they left me alive as bait... and... I couldn't say anything because... they'd killed my parents for knowing..."

He put a hand to his head. "Did you tell Mom this?"

Veronica nodded. "Yesterday. I... I had to say something because it wasn't him. I swear, Jonathan. He wouldn't hurt Will. He's not like that, and what I saw wasn't him, but everyone keeps saying it was—only I don't—I swear that woman was there and she drugged me again because... I'm supposed to be crazy so no one will believe me. Alive but useless because I'm just bait... and I know it's hard to believe but... Hopper said... he said the burns I have didn't come from a fire. It's not just me. I thought... I was losing it, but Hopper said that... and he was in Indianapolis. He came and he said that he wanted to be there but they were listening to the house... they know, Jonathan. These people, they knew that thing took Will and they didn't do anything about it."

"You think they made that call?"

"I don't know who made that call," Veronica said. "I just know he

didn't hurt Will. And if he had... We have found a fire. There's no fire. And he wouldn't take Will to get to me because I'd go willingly. I would. And that's what no one seems to understand... He wouldn't have to hurt anyone to get to me.”

If there was anything Jonathan did believe in what Veronica had told him, it was that. If this was her boyfriend and he'd come for her, she'd just have left with him. So it wasn't her boyfriend. What the hell did that mean?

“If it's not him, who is it? Who took Will?”

“I don't know. I saw a man that didn't look like a man... a thing... and I was scared... and I... can't remember after that... but I think these people that made him could have made the monster, too.”

“Who are they?”

She shook her head. “All I know is that they have a lab somewhere. He never said where.”

“A lab?” Jonathan's mind went to the place right outside Hawkins. The Department of Energy was doing something out there, and most people didn't even think about it most days. It had always been there, at least as long as he'd been alive, so he'd never really questioned it before.

She nodded. “Look, you can't tell anyone what I told you. If I'm wrong, and I'm just insane... fine. You keep it to yourself, you don't seem as nuts as I am. And if not... then they really are listening and I don't want you getting killed, either.”

Jonathan wasn't about to tell anyone. Not only did it sound insane, but if word got out about it... Things would get so much worse. No, he wasn't going to tell anyone.

But he might look into the lab some more.

Hop was really starting to hate it when Flo didn't give him much information before sending him somewhere. He should know by now that it was a bad sign, a really bad one. She only held back when she

knew it would be, when it was something that shouldn't be said over the radio, and this was something that shouldn't be said, not that it wouldn't be around town anyway within hours.

The idea made him sick to his stomach. He didn't want people knowing. Didn't want people talking. Didn't want to believe it.

This was less real than Joyce's phone call or Veronica's phantom boyfriend.

And more, as much as he hated to admit it.

"Ugh, Jesus," Callahan said, taking in the body on the table, flies buzzing around his head and the blood. "Suicide?"

"Mmm-hmm," Hop said, since that was certainly what it looked like. Bit hard to believe of Benny Hammond. That man didn't have a cowardly bone in his body, not that it was always about cowardice. Hop hadn't been around that much, but he'd seen no sign of Benny being depressed or anything. Hop had seen a lot of men struggle after Vietnam, but He was usually good with a laugh, a meal, and a bit of advice, whether you wanted it or not.

Hell, Benny was half the reason Hop had moved back to Hawkins after his life went to shit. He'd seen Hop through some bad years.

"Missing kid, suicide..." Callahan said. "You must feel like a big city cop again, huh, Chief?"

"Well, I mostly dealt with strangers back then," Hop said, not liking this at all. "Benny was my friend."

This didn't make any sense. Hawkins wasn't like this. Garden gnome theft, stupid pranks, that was Hawkins. A few drunks at the bar. Teenagers breaking speed limits with new licenses. Stupid high school parties. Owls in hair. Petty crimes at best. Hawkins was quiet, so quiet even Hop couldn't screw up being chief of police. No. This wasn't his hometown.

Veronica Sawyer came along, and all of a sudden, they had Lonnie showing back up to create a domestic disturbance, Will went missing, and now this. Far as he knew, Veronica had never met Benny, but

Hop's mind was trying to make connections anyway. Could this have something to do with that boyfriend of hers, if he did even exist?

Or that damned phone call?

Hop didn't know. He wanted a drink and to forget all of this. He didn't think he could get this image out of his head, Benny slumped over the table, hand next to the gun, sitting there dead.

Except... the hell? How was this Benny? Benny loved his restaurant with his whole soul, and he'd just go and kill himself in it? No. That didn't fit. It didn't feel right.

Nothing felt right.

Do what you have to do, Hop. You've got a kid missing. A job to do.

He drew in a breath and let it out. "Let's get him out of here."

"We'll handle it," Powell said. Hop nodded, walking away from him, passing through the kitchen on his way outside.

He lit up a cigarette, thinking. Why did the place seem so damned clean? Sure, Benny must have done it after shutting down, and closing meant cleaning, that was the way of any restaurant, but how did this place seem so... spotless? He'd never known Benny's place to be so neat, either.

Neat and tidy because he was planning a suicide?

And yet... why? Why here? Hop couldn't help thinking it was more likely that Benny would have done it at his home, not ruined the diner and everyone's meal. That was his motto—don't ruin the food. So why this?

"Chief?"

He looked over at Callahan. "Need to talk to anyone who was here yesterday. All the regulars."

"We'll have more volunteers for the search soon. People getting off work."

"I know," Hop said. "That doesn't change this. Need to speak to the people who saw him last. Just... just to be sure."

"Yeah, 'course, Chief."

He'd been watching for hours now with no sign of Eleven emerging from the house. He didn't like this position. It was uncomfortable and too exposed, though with the way Hawkins worked, he could probably pull himself back into hell easily enough. He didn't to go back to that place. The red stillness of the firewalk was almost soothing. Like nothing and no one else existed, and it was quiet, peaceful. He didn't feel pain in it, even if he had just used his abilities or he'd been hurt.

That place... the dark one... it hurt. It hurt like it seeped down under the skin and cut him in places he couldn't see.

And he didn't want to go back there again. Ever.

He looked at the house again. Could he assume that Eleven was safe with those boys and just leave? He didn't want to wait around here. Eleven was... Kali would call her sister, as she'd named him brother, but he was not so certain. He just didn't want the lab to have Eleven. That was it.

And he couldn't watch over Veronica here. He didn't like that, either.

Eleven was free, so they'd be looking for her.

They might even think it wasn't worth keeping Veronica alive to catch him. He should go find her, get her away from here where they couldn't hurt her, but she had family again, and he didn't know what to do about the family. He couldn't take that many people into a firewalk.

Actually... doing a firewalk with another person with the dark place pulling him in... that might kill him. No. No firewalks.

Was Will still in the dark place? He needed to know, because he could get back there—maybe—and find Will, maybe even get him out—but it was so hard to know what to do most because he was being

pulled in so many directions.

Eleven. Veronica. Will.

He wanted to ignore the others for what really mattered to him. He should. He dropped down from his tree and groaned, wincing as he did. The landing had hurt.

And he was hungry again. All night out in the rain with only his own ability to create fire to keep him warm... it was exhausting.

Though... he had seen that boy leaving the girl's window. That meant there was an entry way into the house. It could be done, and if he got in, he could see Eleven. That would make his night in the tree worth it.

He climbed up and to the window, leaning against the house when he heard a girl's voice.

"Because I don't want to go by myself."

He frowned. This was one of the girls who'd been with Veronica at the mall. She was in the same house as Eleven. This was not good.

"I know, but if she needs a ride, Jonathan can take her. Come on, Barb. For me? Please?" The girl sighed. "You could just bring her. She might prefer it over worrying about Will."

So Will was still missing? Was that what he'd just heard?

"Barb, it's not rocket science. You just tell your parents you're gonna stay at my place afterward. No, tell them we're studying. Yes, with Veronica if she agrees to go. Or you can drop her off at the assembly first."

"Nancy! Dinner!"

"Coming," she called out to the other voice. "Look, I gotta go. I'll see you in an hour."

He grimaced, knowing he had to wait for that hour, had to see if Veronica came. If she was found anywhere near Eleven, Papa's people

would really hurt her.

He couldn't let that happen.

"Just doesn't make any sense, Chief," Earl said, echoing Hop's thoughts on the matter. He'd been thinking the same thing through the drive back to the station and every other conversation he'd had with the people who'd been at the diner yesterday.

Benny's death made no damned sense.

"You, uh, notice anything odd about him the last few weeks?" Hop asked, knowing that sometimes there were signs people missed. He'd been busy with his booze and pills, not bothering to do much with Benny unless he was stopping in for a quick meal, and he'd dropped the ball himself. He knew that his own opinion of there being no signs this was coming wasn't enough.

"No, we're fixin' to go fishing down the Etowah next Sunday," Earl said, shaking his head. "I mean, he was lookin' forward to it. I know that."

Again with things that didn't add up to suicide. Benny had plans, and not just any plans. Fishing plans. Those were important to him. Taking time off was no simple thing for Benny.

He'd have wanted that time. This wasn't like him. Suicide did not fit Benny Hammond.

"He got any enemies you might know about?" Hop pushed, getting a look from Callahan. He was glad he'd left Powell doing other things. Callahan could be impulsive and overeager, but at least he wasn't so damned judgmental. That was something Hop did not need right now. He didn't believe this was a suicide. He didn't know that he ever would. "I mean, people who might not want him around?"

"The exes didn't like him much, that's for sure, but nah."

Benny was one of those people just about everyone liked. Lonnie Byers was an exception, but Lonnie Byers was an ass, so he didn't count.

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"Yesterday," Earl answered. "Lunch, same as always."

"Just you and the boys?" Hop asked, though he knew the answer, having already talked to the others. He wanted confirmation, though.

"Yep. Me and Henry and some drifter. He was just stopping in for a bite, though he ate a lot. I remember joking about it with Henry and Benny," Earl said, leaning back in his seat. "Must have had half the menu and most of Benny's chips."

"Anything else you remember about that guy?"

"Was quiet, sat by himself, ate... Seemed polite enough, for all that he ate a ton. Paid for it, didn't cause Benny no trouble. That was this... uh, this kid."

"Different kid?"

"Yeah. The one was older, and he left not long after it happened. At lunch, uh, there was this boy that, uh I mean, he was trying to steal food out of Benny's kitchen." Earl took a drag of his cigarette and let out a breath. "Can you imagine that?"

Hop frowned. A kid stealing food in Benny's kitchen? He gestured to Callahan, who dug up a flier. "This kid what'd he look like?"

"Well, he was about yea high," Earl said, gesturing with his hand. "You know, tiny like. I didn't get a good look at him, though. He was back in the kitchen, mostly, except when Benny dealt with the drifter."

Callahan held the picture in front of Earl. "He look like this?"

"Oh, no, that's That's Lonnie's missin' kid," Earl said, shaking his head. Hop fought the irrational urge to correct him. That wasn't Lonnie's kid. Lonnie hadn't given a shit about Will. Will was Joyce's son. "No. This was a different kid. This one had really short hair. I mean, it was buzzed nearly down to the scalp."

"Yeah, well, let's You know, let's forget about the haircut. I mean, if

this kid had a buzz cut could it be Will?"

Earl frowned, not convinced. "Well, I I didn't get a good look at him. About the right height, though. I mean, could've been. Yeah, that's—could've been."

"Barbara, pull over," Nancy said, and Barb frowned, looking over at her. Nancy had been acting weird all night, and it was even more awkward with Veronica there, since she was quiet and not saying much since they picked her up.

Actually, Barb would really rather not think about that at all, because she didn't want to remember how awkward it was to find out neither Veronica or Jonathan had known about the assembly, and they'd been tense like maybe they'd been fighting.

Barb wanted to ask Veronica about that, but she hadn't managed to draw anything out of her before picking up Nancy, and ever since Nancy got in the car, it was all about the party and Steve, as usual.

"Pull over," Nancy insisted, and Barb did, frowning.

"What are we doing here?" Barb asked. "His house is three blocks away."

"We can't park in the driveway."

"Are you serious?" Barb asked, wondering if she had any idea how insane she sounded right now. Did she really not see what was wrong with this situation?

"Yeah, the neighbors might see."

"Like they won't see you walk up," Veronica muttered from the back seat, and Barb had to agree.

"This is so stupid," Barb said, starting the car back up again. "I'm just gonna drop you off."

"Calm down, Barb," Nancy said. "Come on. You promised that you'd go. You're coming. We're gonna have a great time."

Barb didn't remember agreeing to go, and she still didn't think she or Veronica should be here. "He just wants to get in your pants."

"No, he doesn't."

"Nance, seriously," Barb said, not holding back this time. "He invited you to his house. His parents aren't home. Come on, you are not this stupid."

"Tommy H and Carol are gonna be there," Nancy said, like that fixed anything.

"Tommy and Carol have been having sex since, like, seventh grade," Barb reminded her, hearing Veronica make a gagging noise behind them. "It'll probably just be, like, a big orgy."

Nancy made a face. "Gross."

"I'm serious," Barb said. She was not going to be a part of this. She couldn't do that.

"All right, well you can be, like, my guardian," Nancy said. "All right? Make sure I don't get drunk and do anything stupid."

She started changing shirts to the new one Veronica had helped her find, and Barb rolled her eyes, not believing how someone as smart as Nancy could delude herself so much.

"Is that a new bra?"

"No."

"Liar," Veronica muttered, and Barb couldn't help but agree. Nancy opened the door in a huff, starting out.

Barb sighed, not liking this at all, but she couldn't just leave Nancy here alone. That wasn't right. That wasn't what a friend did. How would Nancy get home?

"You're going after her, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

Jonathan checked on his mom one last time before leaving the house again. He knew it wasn't right, letting her think he'd changed his mind about going to the assembly for Will—he wasn't about to do it, knowing that no one there really gave a damn about his brother and not able to stomach the hypocrisy for even a few minutes—but he didn't want to tell her what he was doing.

And if he did believe Veronica, he didn't dare say anything, either.

He wanted to take another look at Will's way home and the place where Hopper had found his bike. It was late, but maybe it was better to see it as it was when Will did.

He drove up to Maple street where the Wheeler's lived and drove the path his brother would have taken, down past where Lucas lived and then Dustin's turn off, and all the way down toward his own house again.

He slowed, studying the sign on the gate.

Hawkins National Laboratory Department of Energy

Will had rode past this place not long before he disappeared. Could that actually mean something? Was he giving what Veronica told him too much weight?

He shook his head, going on until he found the barricade where the bike had been. He pulled over, parking his car. He shut it off, climbing out and going to the trunk. He opened it up, took out his camera, and shut it again. He put the strap over his head, adjusting it to hold easily and started looking around, taking pictures of the grass.

He snapped another picture when he heard a scream. He started running toward the sound, hoping it wasn't another kid getting taken by that monster Veronica saw. He made it through the brush and trees and stopped when he came up to someone's yard.

No, not just someone.

Steve Harrington's yard.

Tommy had Carol over the pool and she was screaming, but smiling, too, like it was a big joke. Jonathan sighed, shaking his head at his stupidity as he tried to calm himself down.

He frowned. Wait, what the hell? Veronica and Barb were here? Nancy he could understand, because as much as he hated knowing it, she had a thing for Steve, but Barb had come to bring Veronica to that rally.

What was she doing here?

He lifted the camera and started taking pictures.

“Stop it, Tommy, no! Don't!” Carol ordered, and Nancy didn't miss Veronica's eyeroll. No one really thought he'd go through with dumping her in there. “You're such an asshole, Tommy.”

Steve laughed, opening his beer can from the bottom and drinking it down with a bit of a disgusting belch. Nancy knew he was better than that, so it was hard not to find him a bit disappointing. He could be charming and fun and smart, not just a beer drinking idiot like every other man in this town.

“Is that supposed to impress me?”

“You're not?” Steve asked, feigning hurt.

She snorted. “You are a cliché, you do realize that?”

He shook his head. “You are a cliché, what with your your grades and your band practice—”

“I'm so not in band,” she said, wondering if he really knew her and feeling an urge to prove him wrong because she wasn't the cliché here. He was. She was so much more than anyone knew, and she was sure of it.

“Okay, party girl,” Steve teased. “Why don't you just, uh, show us how it's done, then?”

“Okay,” Nancy said, getting up to do it, seeing Barb give her a look of

concern, the same one that hadn't left her face since they got here, really.

Steve tried to show her what to do. "You gotta make a little hole right in—"

"I got it," Nancy said, determined to do it on her own. She didn't need him to teach her.

"Yeah, she's smart, you douche," Tommy said, and she grimaced as they started to chant. "Chug, chug, chug."

She drank it down, chugging the whole thing and feeling a bit sick and woozy as she finished. She'd never really drank much before, and it was going to be interesting to see how it affected her. She wondered if one beer could really make her drunk.

"Seriously, if this is all it takes to impress you losers," Veronica said, popping the can like she'd done it hundreds of times. She drank it down without anyone chanting for her, most of them just staring in disbelief. She crumpled the empty can and tossed it to the side, sitting down and lighting another cigarette.

"You didn't," Carol said, still staring.

"Wait for the encore when I puke all over your shoes," Veronica told her, shrugging. "Trust me, you've got nothing on a Remington University party."

Carol glared at her. "You wouldn't."

"Lick it up, baby, lick it up," Veronica said, smirking and blowing smoke into Carol's face.

Nancy tried not to laugh. Crazy as Veronica was, it was nice to see someone standing up to Carol for once. That almost made it worth it. "Barb, you wanna try?"

"What?" Barb asked, frowning. "No. No, I don't want to."

Steve handed Nancy a beer and she took it over to Barb. "Come on."

"Yeah, come on," Carol urged, and Tommy and Steve joined her in encouraging Barb to do it.

"Nance, I don't want to."

"It's fun," Nancy said. She looked over at Veronica. "She did it. You can, too. Just give it a—"

"Nance—"

"Just give it a shot," Nancy said, hoping this would be the part that got Barb to enjoy the party a little. She didn't want to go. She was having fun and feeling good. And Steve was looking good, very good. Who wanted to leave?

"Okay."

Nancy started to explain what to do. "So you just—"

"Gnarly," Tommy said as Barb cut her finger, the blood rushing out over the can.

Veronica rose from her chair, all pretense of boredom or whatever it was she'd been doing gone.

"Are you okay?" Steve asked, trying to help Barb.

"Yeah."

"Barb, you're bleeding," Nancy began, a bit worried now. That wasn't supposed to happen. Not at all. She hadn't wanted that.

"I'm fine," Barb insisted, though she didn't sound the least bit fine. "Where's your bathroom?"

Will shivered again, wishing he knew of any way to make this place warmer. He'd huddled inside his closet, trying to stay warm and hide from that thing, and he'd fallen asleep, somehow, though he didn't know how.

He was still tired, though, and cold. He just wanted to go home, but

he didn't know how. He'd tried looking again for a way out, but he hadn't found one.

He wished the fire mage would come back, but he was starting to think he'd imagined it. He'd imagined everything. He must be dead. That's what this place was. Death.

He almost tripped over the phone cord when he started walking through the house. He stopped, picking it up with a frown. Wait. This was different.

This was a new phone.

Well, no, it looked gross and sick like everything else in this place, but it wasn't the phone they'd had before. He picked it up and tried to call his number.

It rang, and he felt hope rise in his chest, warming him up a bit as he waited.

"Hello?" His mom's voice came through the line again, and he wanted to cry he was so relieved. "Who is this? Will? Will, it's me. Talk to me. I'm here. Just tell me where you are, honey."

He looked around, not sure how to tell her what he saw. It was their house, but it wasn't. It was dead, covered in vines and darkness and it looked like nothing had ever lived here.

"I can hear you. Please."

"Mom?" Will asked, hoping she really could hear him and would help him.

"Will! Yes, it's me. It's me. Where are you?"

He turned to look at the house, but when he did, he heard it again, that noise. No. Not that thing. Why did it always come back when he was trying to reach his mom? He was so close.

"Where are you? Just talk to me—"

The phone sparked and died, and he swore as he dropped it, shaking

his head. There had to be something else, anything else, here. He could do this. He could find a way to do it. He went down the hall to Jonathan's room, running to the stereo. He turned it on, pushing the button to play his mix tape.

Should I stay or should I go?

That was the question, wasn't it? Was the house safe, warded by the fire mage, or was it not? Could that thing get him if he stayed? And what about his mom?

"These people don't know the meaning of first aid," Veronica muttered, slamming the cupboard shut. Not so much as a damned bandaid, and Barb bleeding over there. "Maybe they keep that stuff upstairs and not down here."

"I am not going upstairs," Barb said. "Just... I'll make my own bandage."

Veronica nodded, taking a bit of toilet paper and wrapping it around Barb's finger, getting it nice and tight, best she could do for now. "I guess that will do until we leave."

Barb nodded. "Can't believe I did that. So stupid."

"I shouldn't have done it," Veronica said. "I didn't think they'd push you to do it—I just wanted to stick it in Carol's face. And now I'm sick to my stomach. So not worth it."

"A bit worth it. I wish I had a picture of when you told Carol to lick it up. That was priceless."

"Far more effective on her than Heather Chandler," Veronica said, smiling a little. She leaned over the sink and sighed. "We should probably go. I... I don't think I should have come at all... I just don't like being in the house right now."

Barb nodded. "I bet it's hard, waiting and not knowing."

Veronica thought about saying something about the monster and decided not to. Barb didn't need that. She followed the other girl out

into the hallway, turning back from the door they'd come in when she heard voices.

Barb went ahead, calling out to her friend. "Nance. Nancy. Where are you going?"

Nancy stopped on the stairs, looking back at her. "Nowhere. Just upstairs. To change. I fell in the pool."

She gestured with her towel, and Veronica rolled her eyes. She so didn't believe that for a second. What kind of an idiot did Nancy think Barb was?

"Why don't you go ahead and go home? I'll just I'll get a ride or something."

"Nance—"

"Barb, I'm fine."

Barb shook her head. "This isn't you."

"I'm fine," Nancy insisted. "Just go ahead and go home, okay?"

She started back up the stairs, and Barb winced, lowering her head. Veronica reached over to comfort her, but she pulled away and went back out to the yard. Veronica followed after her, seeing the distress and worry all over someone who deserved so much better.

"Don't do this to yourself," Veronica told her. "You're not responsible for her actions."

"It's not—"

"And you shouldn't have to suffer because she has bad choice in men, either," Veronica said. "I mean... Steve's not the worst. When it comes to that, I think that I'd probably say Ram Sweeney, since he didn't take no for an answer, but Kurt Kelly's right up there, too."

Barb looked at her, shaking her head. "I don't want to know, but this isn't even—I just want to make sure she gets home safe, even if she is being stupid."

“She doesn't deserve it.”

“You don't know her,” Barb said. “She's better than this. This isn't—”

“I bet Betty Finn said that about me over and over again,” Veronica said, knowing that her friend had still had hope for her when there really wasn't any worth having. Veronica wasn't worth saving or believing in. “She was wrong. I didn't—I was terrible to her, and I don't—you don't deserve that. I can see it happening, and I don't want to. I don't want you to... I don't want that to be you because I know I hurt her. I did, and I can't fix it...”

Barb gave her a sad smile. “I don't think she was completely wrong to hope. You know now, right?”

“That still doesn't mean you should have to suffer.”

Barb shrugged, walking over to the diving board. She sat down on the edge, reaching over to take off her shoes. She stuck her feet in the pool. “I'm not leaving until I know she's okay. It's... I need to stay. For my sake.”

Veronica nodded. She took a step toward the chairs, and the lights flickered. She frowned, looking over at the shed, and then she screamed.

That thing, the thing without the face. It was here. It was back.

And it took Barb.

20. Chapter 20

Summary for the Chapter:

Nine makes it to Hawkins.

The night gets long for everyone.

Notes for the Chapter:

So nervous about this one...

October 5

He lied to Kali.

He knew there was some chance she would learn what he did, and she might not forgive him for that, in which case he was slightly worried about Slushie, but he did not believe that Funshine would let her hurt him. Or at least, he hoped not.

She might not know he'd done it on purpose, either.

He had made it look good. It was a beautiful fire, one of the best he'd ever done, so it was convincing, and it would have been one of the ones where no one could have escaped from it, but he hadn't sealed the windows or doors. That man might have gotten out, if he was still inside when he started the fire.

He'd given the man time to get away.

He didn't understand why. He knew he felt strange about Kali's plan of hurting everyone who had hurt them. He knew that would make them keep hunting him, and he was tired of running, tired of moving around all the time. He wanted to stay in one place, with Veronica. And Slushie. Maybe he could have a dog, too. He thought he'd like to try that.

He didn't need to hurt anyone, which was something he'd basically

known but was clearer now that he'd met Veronica. She might be the only one who liked him, but she was enough. He'd never wanted a whole world full of people to like him.

He'd wanted Papa to care about him, but he didn't think that man ever did, and now he didn't want it anymore because he understood. The things Papa made him do were wrong. He was wrong, but he didn't have to be so wrong that everyone hated him, that they were all scared of him.

He just had to get Veronica. She was his only friend, the only person that mattered to him.

He would, too. He'd find her.

As soon as he felt like he could move again. That fire had taken more out of him than he'd thought it would, though he should have known. He was already weak, still healing from the bullets, and he wasn't able to rest much after taking Kali home.

He shouldn't have done that, but he needed her to understand that he could. He wanted her to know that he could do much more than she knew before, and he knew that he was hoping that she would change her mind and come with him—he didn't need her, and he wouldn't risk her friends—not that they'd be much use, too visible and not prepared for real threats. The stuff they said they did, that was not like the armies of soldiers that came after him. They all had guns, the more dangerous ones, the ones that fired bullet after bullet in an endless stream.

The ones that had killed Veronica's mom.

He closed his eyes. That was his fault. If he hadn't set that man on fire, Veronica's mom might be alive now.

He couldn't bring her back, but he had to make sure that Veronica was safe.

He would.

Just as soon as he could move again.

He woke late, when it was already dark. This place was not comfortable, not meant for sleeping, and he thought the cold had woken him. The night was freezing, and he didn't have a blanket, wasn't inside any good shelter. He had trees, that was it.

He forced himself up, looking around. He didn't have a map in the firewalk, and he didn't understand how it all worked, but he found he could control where he came out to a point, finding places he didn't know. He risked things when he only had vague directions, like getting as far away as he could and ended up in Texas or some other strange place.

He figured the firewalk had limits, but he didn't know them all. He thought he should learn them, but he didn't want to experiment. Those were done now. He was free. He didn't need to know more than he did because he could get where he needed to, and he could get Veronica out.

That was all that mattered.

He forced himself out of the trees and up against a building. A shed. He looked around, frowning. He had wanted to be close to Veronica but not where he would be caught right away, and that wasn't very specific, but then he didn't know enough to be more specific. Her aunt's house, yes, he'd wanted to be close to it if it existed, but he didn't know if it did.

He didn't know if they would have lied about her, if they would have taken her all the way to the lab. If he couldn't find her in town, he would go to the lab. First, though, he would check the town. He knew he wasn't up to burning down the lab. He hurt, and he was weak. He needed food and someplace warm to sleep.

He thought he smelled smoke, and he stopped to check his jacket. He did smell of fire a lot, but this wasn't him. He went forward, following the scent around the house.

He saw the cigarette first, the tail end bright enough to catch his eye, but then he saw her and had to smile. Oh, she looked beautiful. Her hair was a mess, and her clothes were all wrong and too loose but she was still perfect.

He almost went toward her, but then he stopped. Why would she be outside like that? Free? They wouldn't let that happen.

This had to be a trap.

“Veronica?”

He watched her drop the cigarette, snuffing it out with her foot. She turned back to face a woman who looked just like her.

“Sweetheart, what are you doing outside? I got home and checked your room and you weren't there and I was worried—it's freezing out here. You should be inside.”

Veronica shivered. “I just... I wasn't... I'm sorry, Aunt Joyce.”

He frowned, watching the woman wrap her arms around Veronica and lead her inside.

Was he wrong? Was Veronica safe with this woman? Was she okay?

No. This was Hawkins. How could she be safe here?

November 8

A full day of searching and all they had to show for it was a scrap of fabric on a drain. That pipe led to Hawkins lab, but there was no going after it tonight. It was late and dark, and he knew they weren't going to let him in.

Hop had called off the search for the night and gone home, wanting a drink and his bed for a few hours. He wouldn't even need more, he was that exhausted.

He might even have been able to sleep without seeing Benny's body.

His friend. Dead. And he couldn't do anything about it. It looked like a damned suicide, and he didn't know how he'd prove it wasn't. He had no evidence, only his instincts and years of knowing the man screaming that Benny would never end his own life.

But if not Benny, who? And why?

That drifter Earl had mentioned? Was it him?

Hop almost smacked himself for being so damned stupid. A drifter, eating at Benny's diner. They didn't get a lot of out of town traffic, nowhere in Hawkins did. It was locals or nothing, really, and for someone to be there, eating like he hadn't eaten in days...

Fuck. Veronica's boyfriend. That kid was here. He'd been at Benny's diner yesterday. He could have been the one to kill Benny, though why? Because he saw the kid? Henry and Earl did, too, so that didn't make sense.

Unless... he went back for the money he'd spent later. Could Benny have walked into a robbery?

"What are you doing?" a woman asked, and Hop turned back to face her. He'd almost forgotten about letting Sandra in. He'd been low, and sex was one way of forgetting. It almost seemed the best way, with everything pushing him back into Joyce's orbit again. He didn't know how to be close to her without getting burned, and he already knew he was in trouble. He'd broken plenty of rules for her already in this investigation, and he'd probably break more. "It's freezing."

"You ever feel cursed?" Hop asked, not sure if he was asking about himself or someone else. Both, he supposed. "You know, the last person to go missing here was in the summer of twenty-three. The last suicide was the fall of sixty-one."

Joyce's aunt. And then her dad.

Now her niece was mixed up with a psycho who could have taken her boy. And Hop was the dumb cop who couldn't seem to make it stop. His friend was dead because he'd gone and soft-pedaled things with the girl. He had fucked up his job bad back after his daughter died, but that was just it, wasn't it? He destroyed what he touched. His daughter. His ex-wife.

"When'd the last person freeze to death?" Sandra asked, pulling on his shirt. "Hey, come back inside. Warm me up."

He couldn't do it. He couldn't explain. He wanted her gone, but he wouldn't throw her out in the middle of the night. He wasn't that much of a bastard.

Just close.

She watched him, waiting for a response, another round, but he'd lost all taste for his usual bad methods of coping. He wanted something more than this, wanted a way to set right all he'd done wrong, things he could never have.

“Just... Just give me a minute out here.”

“Veronica!”

Jonathan ran toward his cousin, not caring anymore if anyone knew he was here. Oh, sure, he'd get hell for this, trespassing at Steve Harrington's house, but he didn't care. He had looked down to adjust his camera, and when he looked back up, Barb was gone and Veronica was screaming her head off.

Something was wrong. This wasn't like before when Tommy was teasing Carol. This was bad. Whatever it was, it was bad.

Veronica turned, shaking, but she saw him, and she ran toward him, clinging to him like he was... everything. “Jonathan, it was here. It was here. It took Barb.”

He held her, frowning. “Veronica, what are you talking about?”

He hadn't seen anything or anyone else here. The others—Tommy, Steve, Carol, and Nancy—they were all inside. Jonathan had even done something incredibly stupid and photographed Nancy at the window. First she'd looked a bit... lost, and then she'd taken off her shirt and that one had almost been an accident. He'd just seen something in her face he wanted to capture, and then she'd surprised him by undressing in front of Steve even though Jonathan knew where that was going.

“Veronica, there's no one else here.”

"It was here," she repeated, looking up at him. "Jonathan, that thing, the one without a face. The one that took Will... it was here. It took Barb. She was there and then gone just like him... It took her."

Jonathan frowned again, biting his lip. He didn't know what had happened—Barb had been there, but she was gone now. "Maybe you just upset her and she took off."

Veronica pulled away from him. "What?"

"She could have left on her own or—"

"No. Don't do this to me. Don't. Please," Veronica begged, biting her lip and looking around frantically. "Jonathan, please..."

"What the hell is going on?" Steve demanded, opening the door. "What are you doing here, Byers?"

Jonathan snorted. "Seriously? My cousin was screaming. I heard her. I came."

"What were you even doing nearby?" Tommy asked. "Spying on us, perv? Taking pictures?"

Jonathan shook his head. "I was taking pictures of where they found my brother's bike. It's not that far from here. I heard screams, and I came here."

"What happened?" Nancy asked, looking between everyone. "What's going on? Veronica, where's Barb? Didn't you leave together?"

Veronica shook her head. "No. She wanted to stay for you, but she's gone. That thing. It took her. It took her."

"Thing?" Carol asked. "What thing?"

Jonathan moved over to take Veronica's arm. "Come on. Let's go."

"No," Veronica said, looking over at the pool again. "I can't... I didn't... it... Why does this keep happening? I saw it. I know I... I saw it."

"Saw what?" Nancy asked. "Veronica, where is Barb?"

"The thing... the thing without the face... it took her."

"Damn, she really is psycho," Tommy said. "Look at her. She's insane."

"Or just jealous," Carol said, getting frowns from everyone. "What, like this wasn't a big prank you and your freak cousin and lame friend cooked up to scare us and keep goody goody Nancy away from the big, bad Steve? Because it sure looks like it from here."

"Fuck you," Veronica said. "You think I would lie about seeing that thing again? About it taking Barb? Fuck you."

She pushed past them, running toward the woods. Jonathan gave Nancy another glance, shaking his head and going after her, finding her just outside the yard, on her hands and knees, sobbing.

"I didn't make it up," Veronica said. "I saw it. It took Barb."

He knelt down to help her up. "Come on. Let's get you home."

"Jonathan, please. It has her. We have to do something."

"Like what?" he couldn't help asking. "It's not here. There's no one here but us and those jerks over there, and we can't do anything. You... you just need to rest. You were drinking, weren't you? And didn't you say you couldn't really handle it?"

Veronica shuddered, not fighting him as he led her toward the car.

Barb woke, coughing and choking, the sickest taste in her mouth. She couldn't see through her glasses and pulled them off, still coughing. Something had gotten in her mouth, and she couldn't get it out. She gagged, sitting up. She looked around her, confused.

She wasn't blind without her glasses, but even with them, this place would seem wrong. She'd been above the pool, on the diving board, but now she thought she was in it, only there wasn't any water. It was covered in sick looking vines, dark things that could be dead.

They didn't look healthy, like plants should. No, this was all wrong.

“Nancy? Veronica?”

She heard a noise behind her and turned, seeing a figure, distorted and not very human—she didn't think it was just her bad vision—no one had arms and legs that long and thin and its body was skinny and wrong, too narrow to be a man even if it was kind of close.

She screamed, running toward the side of the pool. Where was the ladder? The thing had a ladder. She knew it did.

She ran along the side of it, her hands fumbling along the vines until she found the steps. She grabbed hold of the ladder and started climbing as that sound it made got closer. She slipped, screaming, and tried to pull herself up again.

She reached the top, about to crawl out over it, and then something grabbed hold of her foot, yanking on her.

“Nancy!” Barb screamed. “Veronica!”

Someone, anyone. She needed help. Badly. That thing. It had her. She was going to die. She didn't know what it was, but she knew it was going to hurt her. She struggled, trying to grasp the side of the pool, and then something hot brushed her foot.

The thing squealed like it was hurt, and it let go of her. She scrambled up over the side of the pool, looking down to see it on fire, screaming as it tried to back away from the flames taking over the empty pool.

“Looks like I got you trapped this time,” someone said, and Barb turned to see a boy in a long dark coat holding his hand out over the fire.

She swallowed, not sure she believed what she was seeing. “You were in Indianapolis.”

He glanced toward her, and the flames flickered, the thing in the pool dragging itself up over the other side, limping away into the woods.

“Fuck,” he muttered, dropping to his knees. “Could have... killed it... if... kept it... here.”

Barb stared at him. “You... you did that fire? That was... you. You... What, you threw a lighter at it and it caught and... are you okay?”

He shook his head. “No. This place... fucks with my... system... hurts like... a bitch... that's the expression... right?”

Barb frowned. This didn't make sense. She ran her hands over her arms, shivering. This place was even colder than being out at the party. “Was I drinking? I swear I didn't, but this is... none of it makes sense. The dark, the vines, that thing... you.”

He laughed. “I'm the worst of it. Trust me.”

“This is some kind of dream. Or something. You were in Indianapolis. At the mall. You're Veronica's boyfriend.”

He looked at her like he was thinking about that. “Um... yes. Suppose I am.”

“That was something you had to question?” Barb asked, wondering what the hell was going on with him. “Wait, how did you get in here? I don't—I'm not sure how I got here... I don't... where is this place? Is it real?”

“Yes... and no...” He tried to force himself up, falling back with a groan. “Damn, I shouldn't have... If I'd been a bit faster... could have killed it. Could have...”

“Hey,” Barb said, feeling brave enough to move toward him. “You saved me. That counts for something, right?”

He gave her a small smile. “I... You were good... to Veronica. Kind.”

Barb nodded. She had been, though she hadn't really thought it would end up being something that saved her life. She just did it because it seemed right, and she did actually like her, even if maybe at first it was pity.

“You think it will come back?”

"It did before," he said, and she stared at him, fear creeping back over her. That thing could come back. It could kill them. Both of them.

"Before? You've faced that thing before?"

He nodded. "Didn't win."

"We better get your lighter back, then," Barb said, moving toward the ladder again. She couldn't see much of anything. "And my glasses."

"Your glasses, maybe," he said. She looked back at him, and he held up a lighter in his hand. "Still... have this. Might need... later. Hurts too much... do it myself."

She frowned. He wasn't making sense. "Um... if it comes back... can you stop it again?"

He nodded. "As long... still... conscious..."

She didn't know what to think of that, either, but she needed her glasses. She shouldn't have left them down there. She swallowed, not sure she dared go back where that thing had almost killed her.

She was about to step down when he grabbed hold of her. "It's coming back."

"What? Already? Didn't you hurt it?"

"Fire hurts it," he said. "It also pisses it off."

Jonathan looked over at Veronica again, but she was facing away from him, and he couldn't even tell if her eyes were open or not. He didn't know what to think of what happened tonight, but he figured getting them both out of there was better than sticking around. Whatever Veronica had seen—if she saw anything at all—no one else believed her, and the rumors would start up like crazy.

His stomach twisted up. Tomorrow, they'd probably be saying one of them killed Barb. He liked to tell himself he could ignore the rumors, but this wasn't the same. Being weird and an outcast had never

mattered to him when he had his family, but if people started thinking he was a killer, that he'd been the one to hurt Will or even Barb, they could do a lot worse than they did now. Words were nothing, even a fight wasn't that bad, but if Barb stayed missing like Will was still missing... They might try and lynch him or something.

He shook his head, trying to tell himself he was the one that was crazy, but he knew it wasn't entirely insane to think the town would turn on him if they thought he'd done something to Barb.

He pulled up to their house, parking in his usual spot. He turned off the engine and reached over to touch Veronica's arm.

She jerked and hit the door, staring at him.

"We're home."

She looked at the house and sighed, biting her lip. "You really do think I'm crazy, don't you?"

He frowned. "Veronica—"

"You do, or you would have stayed there so we could look for Barb," Veronica said, reaching for the door handle. She got out and slammed it shut, running up to the porch.

He sighed, shaking his head as he got out of the car. He wasn't sure what to think. Barb had disappeared, but he didn't know that it meant that she'd been taken, and even if she had, they couldn't do much now.

He went inside, glancing at the empty chair where his mom had been sitting earlier. He hoped that she had gone to bed. He walked down to Veronica's room, opening the door. "Veronica?"

"Go away."

"Tomorrow, in the morning, we can look around Steve's house, see if we can find anything to tell us where that thing went."

"You don't have to pretend to humor me."

He shook his head. "I'm not pretending. I just... They didn't believe you, and they wouldn't have let us look tonight, but if we go back, we can look. Okay? We'll go in the morning. First thing."

Veronica nodded. "Okay."

He started to close the door.

"I'm not crazy, Jonathan. That thing was there. The thing that took Will. It took Barb. I know it did. I know what I saw tonight. I did not drink that much."

"I know," he said, shutting the door this time. He walked down to his own room, opening the door and frowning. He walked around the bed, going to the foot and touching her shoulder.

"Mom?"

She jerked and looked up at him. "Jonathan?"

"What are you doing in here, Mom?"

"I heard Will," she said, and he grimaced, his heart sinking. First Veronica, now this? Was their family cursed? Was that it? "I heard him, Jonathan. He was on the phone and then the music... the lights... that thing..."

He sighed. "Mom, you need to get some sleep."

"Will is here. I can feel it."

"Okay," Jonathan said, not up to fighting with her at all. He wasn't about to tell her about the party or that thing taking Barb, if that even happened. "Just lie down, okay? You can sleep in Will's bed if it makes you feel close to him. I just... I want you to get some rest."

She nodded numbly, and he helped her lie down, pulling the sheets over her.

"Hold on," Barb said, pulling the kid in the trench coat to a stop. He'd set that thing on fire and made them run, and they had, so far and so

long her bare feet were aching and probably torn open and bloody, and she didn't want to look at them. She wasn't sure how he was even moving, though, because he'd been barely functional when they were beside the pool, and now they weren't even close to there. "You need to rest."

"No, I have to... have to go... if I stop... can't start again."

"Are you insane?" she demanded. "You can barely move as it is, and that thing has not stopped chasing us. You can't keep pushing yourself like this. You're going to... die or something, and I don't... you can't, okay? You just can't."

He slumped down against the tree. "I think... very possible... I can."

She grimaced. "I just... I can't do this alone. You use that lighter like a weapon. I'd probably burn my own hand with it and lose it just before that thing kills me."

He shook his head. "Not the lighter."

She frowned, sitting down next to him. "Look, if it was something I thought you could teach me, I'd so ask you to do it, okay? But I don't think we have time to do that, and I'm not sure you're up to doing it again because you look really pale and sick right now. I just wish I knew how it kept finding us so we could stop it."

He closed his eyes. "It's... hunter..."

"Like a predator," she said, trying to think. "So it just... has our scent?"

He snorted. "You think you smell? Just... gross... like this place..."

She looked down at her slimy coat and sighed. "Yeah, I suppose I probably smell like this place, but you don't seem to. Why is that?"

"I firewalk."

"What?"

He laughed, giving her a bit of a smile as he did. "Freak... born in..."

lab. Ignore me.”

She decided she would, since she wasn't sure what else to do with him anyway. He shifted against the tree, and she wondered if he could actually sleep there. She didn't want to stay here, but she didn't know where they were, and they were going to have to find shelter if not a way out of this place, assuming they lived at all.

“Okay, so it hunts, but it didn't seem to mark me unless it's this stuff that got all over me, so... it's tracking the fire? Why would it track the fire? It seems to really hurt it.”

He sat up and took her hand. “You bleed.”

“Yeah, well, so did you, but that was a nosebleed, so...”

“Bud told me... story... bloodhound... could track... trained with blood... was... disgusting... but he said... that was what... dogs were... so I shouldn't want one... and... he said... predators like that... hunt the blood...”

Barb's eyes widened and she looked at her hand. “You think it can sense this?”

“Maybe? I don't know. Not smart.”

She didn't know about that. He was probably right about the thing tracking the blood. “Okay, so say that it's tracking the blood. How do we stop it?”

“Stop the blood.”

“What, die?”

He shook his head, unwrapping her bandage and studying her hand. He looked at her. “This... wil hurt... Don't... hate me for it.”

She stared at him in confusion and then her hand burned, the wound sealing up as fire cauterized it. He let go and fell back against the tree again, breathing hard. She drew in a sharp breath, struggling to get air.

“What did you do? How did you do that? I didn't even see the lighter.”

He shook his head. “No lighter. Just me.”

“What?”

He looked at her. “You... and the things you don't... see... because you don't... want to believe them... rational explanations... for monsters... and things like me... they don't exist... because we shouldn't. It shouldn't. I shouldn't.”

“You made that fire? Out of nothing? Nowhere?”

“My mind,” he said, and she swallowed. This could not be real. It just couldn't. People couldn't do that sort of thing. “Told you... lab freak.”

“That's something out of a movie or a book. Fiction. Not real.”

He looked at her, shook his head, and lifted his hand, showing her it was empty before flinging fire out in the distance, spreading it across the ground. The flames lit up that thing, and it hissed, pacing behind it like it wanted to come towards them but wouldn't dare cross the fire.

“Oh, my god,” she whispered. “You... you...”

“Need... keep moving. That won't... stop it,” he said, trying to force himself up again. He fell and swore. “Hurts...”

Barb got up, gagging on the thought she'd just had, wanting to run but not sure she could. “You set the fire. The one that killed Veronica's parents.”

He lowered his head. “They were dead... before I started it... but... was... my fault... shouldn't... shouldn't have gone... to her... just... she was kind... wanted her to take... my hamster... Never meant... stay... just... too tired to move... and they... they hurt her because of me...”

“They?”

“People... made me... forced me... be like this...” He pushed himself

up, using the tree for support. "They... they said... too dangerous... to live... kill people... know I exist..."

Barb swallowed. "Wait, so... even if we get away from that thing, people will try and kill me? Veronica's alive. She's safe. You're lying. It's—"

"She's bait. They're using her to get me."

Barb choked. "No."

"Yes. I came... free her... but she has... family... family they'll hurt... if she tells truth... if I go near her... if they know... start all over again..."

"What about Will? Did they take him?"

He shook his head. "He's here. Somewhere. I think. I said... run... he ran... I fought it... but fell back out because... fire... can't control the firewalk here..."

"That's the second time you've mentioned that. What is a firewalk?"

"Can move... through fire... into another place... not this one... or... it wasn't... not until the other night when... saw Will. And that thing..." He looked out at the monster. "They did this... The lab. I know... they did."

"You mean... Hawkins National Laboratory? That place out of town run by the Department of Energy? That's the lab that made you?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"That place has been there all my life," Barb said. "And you're telling me they did experiments on kids there? No way. It's energy research and ways to fight communists or something. That's the rumor, anyway."

"What... you think... I am?" he asked, gesturing to the fire still baring that creature from them. "A weapon. I'm a fucking weapon. A monster... just... look more human... than that thing."

Barb really wanted to wake up from this nightmare. She wanted to go home where it was safe and her biggest problem was whether or not Nancy would still talk to her after she and Steve were official and how she'd have to deal with Carol and Tommy H if Nancy stuck with Steve. She already knew that would be hell, and Veronica wasn't wrong about it hurting to be a part of it like that, but Nancy was her oldest and best friend. They were practically sisters. She'd do anything for her.

She could have died tonight for her, because she was too stubborn to listen to Veronica and leave, because she wanted to be sure Nancy got home safe.

She'd never thought about getting home safe herself.

Now she was trapped here with monsters and she might never see home again.

21. Chapter 21

Summary for the Chapter:

Nine watches Veronica.

The next morning raises plenty of questions.

Notes for the Chapter:

Yesterday got a little long and rough at work (eleven hours, trying to get stuff done to be free today only to have that end in being sick again) and so I didn't get my update finished last night afterward. I tried, but it didn't happen. And then I kept finding more that had to go in this part and am still like, "but these characters haven't even had an appearance" and finally ended where I did because it would have been twice as long if I went to where I intended to go with this chapter, and I figured splitting it was better.

Also, it's very hard to balance the characters. There's so much for all of them and I still haven't found a good way of not repeating word for word the stuff that happens with Eleven as it hasn't changed any other than when Nine tried to reach her.

October 6

He watched over the house all night, taking shelter in the shed. He wanted to know that Veronica was safe, even though every part of him said she couldn't be, not in Hawkins. He was sure they'd brought her here for a reason, that they wanted to use her to get him, but why were they letting her live here, in an ordinary house, with other people?

Why hadn't they taken her back to the lab, forced him to come there?

Did they think he wouldn't risk the lab for her? Or were they afraid he'd do too much damage if he did go against the lab itself?

He could burn it down. He knew he was capable of it. He'd gotten better at destroying things over the years, learned to control his fires so they never spread more than they should but they could take down buildings like Bud wanted. He had practiced plenty around Bud, but even before then he was learning and getting better, stronger. What he'd done before he escaped, what scared them so much, that was nothing now.

He could destroy the building. Maybe he should. If he went right to them, he could end it all, right? Papa and the others, they'd die, and then no one would have to suffer again.

Except... he wasn't sure that it ended with Papa. He'd had people come to watch the experiments before, people he called friends, ones that were very interested in their progress, and he'd said stuff that now seemed like maybe Papa wasn't the one in charge the way he seemed.

"You disappoint me, Nine."

He shivered, pulling the hospital gown tighter around him. He was always cold, and he felt worse when Papa gave him that look and said that terrible word. Papa's disappointment was like pain, even before he was punished. His chest tightened up, and he swallowed.

"Others were supposed to come today, others who also have an interest in your improvement, but what you did last night means I can't have them come. They can't see this mess you've made."

He bit his lip. "Papa, please. I didn't—"

"You didn't do what you were supposed to," Papa said, shaking his head. "You couldn't do the simplest of things. These games are easy enough for a child who doesn't have your potential. You've become such a waste."

"I couldn't see the words," he admitted, knowing Papa didn't like that. "I... I could see something else. Something... I don't know what it was."

"You're desperate, Nine, and I understand that, but you can't make up

stories to have me forgive you. I can't do that. You've disappointed too many people, and I'm afraid if you can't do what we need you to do, you'll have to go away."

He swallowed. "Where would I go?"

"Don't worry about that now."

"I don't know anywhere but here."

"You never will," Papa said. "It's a shame about that, as I had such hopes for you, but you simply aren't capable of being what we need, so you'll have to go."

"Go where?"

Papa gave him a sad smile. "Somewhere you can't come back from, I'm afraid. You won't feel much. We'll just put you to sleep like we sometimes do, only this time it will be forever."

He shook his head. "No. I can do this. I can be good. I can—"

"It's too late for that," Papa said. "I need you to be still for me now. I'll make this as easy as possible. I told them I'd do it myself. I think you deserve that much, though it's a shame. I thought you were so much more."

He screamed and backed away from Papa and the needle, desperate. He grabbed at that thing he'd felt before, drawing it to him, wanting some kind of help, wanting to prove he could be useful. He saw Papa coming closer again, the needle in his hand, and he had to stop it. He had to.

Papa cried out and dropped the needle, patting down his sleeve.

He crawled back into the corner, shaking. His head hurt, and he knew now he was in real trouble. They'd hurt him.

"Nine," Papa said, turning back to him. "You did that."

"Don't hurt me. Please. Don't make me go away."

Papa came toward him. "I think we've been looking in the wrong place

with you. Imagine, fire created with the mind. The potential... We're going to have to test this."

He lowered his head. He hadn't realized saving himself would mean hurting himself, too. Tests meant pain. He almost wished he'd taken the needle. At least that wouldn't hurt.

The dog started barking, and he came back to himself, backing away from the door where the mutt was trying to get his nose in. He took a few breaths to calm himself, still shaking. He hated memories. He didn't want to think about that.

He didn't like knowing that if he had died back then, Veronica would still have her parents. Her life. She'd be happy. She would have been better off never knowing him, and he knew that.

He'd leave her alone if she was safe. He wouldn't bring her more pain.

Veronica took out the stolen cigarette and lit it with a match, sighing. She leaned against the house and closed her eyes. The pain wasn't as bad today, though everything still ached, and they'd asked her about school again.

She didn't think she wanted to go back again, ever. She'd dreaded it when it was facing life after Heather destroyed her, but she wasn't afraid of that now. Who cared what Heather thought of her? Heather was states away and couldn't touch her now.

What worried her was the others.

She lifted up her shirt and looked at the mark on her side. The dog's scratches weren't bad, but the burn made her sick, and she didn't understand.

She hadn't been burned in the fire. He'd saved her, spared her from that.

"I miss you," she said, shaking her head at herself. "I know that's crazy. I knew you two days, and I sometimes catch myself missing you more than them... and that... it's not right. Nothing about this is

right, though. Who am I kidding? If anyone heard me say what happened that night, they'd think I was nuts. I think I'm nuts."

She took another drag of her cigarette. Her aunt smoked Camels, and she knew it shouldn't matter. She was lucky her aunt smoked at all, or she'd have no way of dealing with her addiction.

The dog started barking, and she jumped, cursing herself for it as she did. She looked over to see it pawing at the shed and rolled her eyes. Stupid thing. It just wanted in where it wasn't supposed to be.

"Not falling for it," she said, shaking her head. "I know they don't want you in there. Jonathan and Joyce both told you to knock it off, so stop it."

The dog whined at her.

"No," she said, finishing her cigarette and dropping it to snuff it out with her shoe. She looked around again, shivering. "Look, why don't you go do something useful? Dig a tunnel to that energy plant or whatever it is that's nearby. Then they could get their energy for free and I wouldn't get a worried look every time I leave the light on."

The dog barked.

She gave it the finger, feeling stupid. She knew that wouldn't work, but even as out of it as she was, she knew she was causing nothing but problems for her aunt. It was obvious with Will. Veronica was pretty sure he hated her for taking his room. Jonathan she didn't know... he was quiet and she doubted anyone knew what he really thought of anything.

Joyce was too frazzled to do much, but that was the point. She was already run ragged, and now Veronica was here. Making it worse.

She stepped inside the house, looking around. She should do something. She should help with this, but every time she looked around, she remembered her house, everything that was gone, and she couldn't do anything.

"I killed them," she whispered to the empty house. "They're dead because of me. Because... because I wanted to help him.. and the

stupid thing is... he's not real. He can't be real. I was right. That night, I wrote in my diary. I sounded like a psycho. And I am. I am."

She sat down on the floor, tears coming again.

She heard the dog barking again and shook, the irritation and laughter fighting each other and making her a mess. She couldn't even get herself together enough to get off the floor.

Then she was warm, like someone had come up behind her and put their arms around her, and he smelled like smoke. She could almost believe someone else was here, that she was safe and comforted, but she knew she was just dreaming again.

"It's not safe... you said you'd come if you could... but she said... you'd come for me... so they... they let me live... as bait... said you'd come to them... but they don't have me... Joyce... she's too overworked to be one of them... but... they must know... or I'm just crazy. That's it, isn't it? You were never real, never here, never there... I'm just insane."

She sighed. "This is a nice dream, though. I think I'll keep it for a bit. Not like there's anything to do but lie in bed. Bed... floor... who cares, right? Same thing... more or less..."

She took a deep breath and leaned into the illusion, deciding to enjoy this bit of madness while it lasted. As long as she didn't look behind her or move, she could believe he was here, holding her, and she wanted to keep that sense for as long as she could.

He was dead, wasn't he?

She'd never actually have this again.

Except in dreams, so why not make it a good one?

November 9

Jonathan woke to his mom's voice, and at first he thought he was still

dreaming, some weird nightmare where everything blurred together and he couldn't keep it straight, what was real and what wasn't. Veronica's stories mixed with real events like they'd actually happened, and he was seeing signs of her boyfriend and monsters all through her time with them, maybe even before it.

He didn't want to think about it anymore. They'd go back to Steve's house in a bit and prove that there was nothing there.

Veronica had said something cruel to Barb and she'd left. It wasn't like he'd missed that look on Barb's face when they were talking. This whole monster thing... it was just a cover for Veronica, nothing else.

No monster had taken his brother. If Will got taken, it was by a person. That was the sane thing to believe, and Jonathan might be the only one of them in this house that was. He knew that Veronica saw something. He didn't doubt that, but as weird as she'd been since she came here and that story of hers—he didn't know that she knew what she'd seen. And maybe Hopper was right and she'd distorted things because it was her boyfriend.

“Will? Will?” his mom asked, and Jonathan tried not to groan. “Sweetheart, can you hear me? Will, please. Will, it's me. It's me. Just talk to me. Talk to me. Just say—”

“Mom,” Jonathan said, forcing himself up, knowing he had to stop this.

“Jonathan,” she said, waving him over to where she was sitting. “Come here.”

“Mom, what is this? Did you sleep at all last night?”

She shrugged, looking back at the lamp. “Come here.”

Even though it was just across the room, he didn't want to. “What's going on?”

“It's Will,” she said, sounding convinced and deranged all at the same time. “It's Will, he's... he's trying to talk to me.”

“He's trying to talk to you?” Jonathan asked, his heart sinking. She

was this bad, and Will was only missing. What would happen if he was dead? She might never come back from this. She'd had bad times before, but nothing like this, and it scared him.

"Yes, through through the lights."

"Mom—"

"I know," she said, though it was no comfort knowing she was aware of how crazy she sounded. "I know. Just... just watch. Will, your brother's awake now. Can you show him what you showed me, baby? Please?"

The light bulb flickered, and she smiled in triumph.

"Did you see that?"

He had, but it wasn't what she thought it was. "It's the electricity, Mom. It's acting up."

"No."

"It's the same thing that fried the phone."

"No," she snapped. "It is not the electricity, Jonathan. Something is going on here. Yesterday, the wall—"

"What?" Jonathan demanded. The walls were doing things now, too? What was she seeing? Some freak like Veronica saw? Was it possible his cousin's lunacy was somehow contagious? "What about the wall?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I don't know."

She didn't know because there was nothing to know. It wasn't real. None of it was.

"Mom, first the lights, then the wall?"

"I just know that Will is here."

Jonathan shook his head, not up to arguing this with her. "No, Mom."

“Maybe if I get more lamps—”

“No, Mom. You don't need more lamps. You need to stop this, okay? He is just lost. Maybe he was taken, but he's not here. People are looking for him, and they're going to find him. Hopper's looking for him. The town is looking for him. He's going to be found.”

His mom nodded shakily. “Okay.”

“This isn't helping,” he said, reaching over to touch her arm.

“Okay, okay. Okay, I'm sorry. I'm sorry.”

She sounded so broken, and he hated himself for doing this to her, but it wasn't right to let her go on like that, either. Will was not talking through the lights. He wasn't here. If he was here, they'd see him. They'd know. The only way that he was here and not visible—that would be his ghost, and Jonathan refused to accept that.

Will was not dead. They would find him.

“Can you do me a favor, Mom?” Jonathan asked. “Can you just try and get some sleep? Huh? Can you do that for me?”

“Yeah. I promise. I will.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “I just need to sit here for a minute.”

He didn't think she meant it, but he could always deal with her once he'd proved that no monster took Barb last night. “All right, I'll go make breakfast.”

“Okay.”

Nancy made her way through the halls, feeling strange. Even though nothing had happened after Barb left and Veronica started screaming about monsters—talk about killing the mood—she swore it was like everyone at school knew she'd been about to have sex with Steve when the screams broke it up and sent them rushing to put clothes

back on and get down to the pool.

She didn't believe Barb would really pull a prank like that, but Veronica was hard to be as sure about. She could just have taken advantage of Barb going and done the screaming thing, couldn't she? She certainly hadn't been nice to Carol, Tommy, or even Steve at the party. She had been drinking, too, so maybe she had just made it all up like Steve said.

She didn't know. Something was wrong, and she wasn't sure what to say to Barb or to Veronica, so she'd just gone home, and if she'd been much later she'd have fought with her mom when she got home. She didn't know what she'd been thinking, what any of them had been thinking. She should have known that the rally for Will wasn't enough of a cover, but she'd been stupid and drank and almost slept with Steve.

Now she wasn't sure she should have gone at all. Even if Barb hadn't been a part of that prank, if it was just Veronica—which Nancy couldn't see Barb leaving her alone at Steve's house when she'd been drinking, too—then something was still very wrong. For her friends to feel that was necessary was bad enough, but she wasn't so sure it was any kind of prank now.

That thought made her sick. She hadn't even looked around at Steve's place for a sign that Barb had run off or that her car was gone. She'd just walked home, feeling stupid.

"Hey," Steve said, coming up to her at her locker and startling her. She jumped a bit, and he frowned in concern. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," she said, realizing it came out too quickly. "Yeah, totally. I just I feel like everyone's staring at me."

He looked around and shrugged. "Oh, I didn't I didn't tell anyone."

"I know. I know. Of course not," Nancy said, figuring it had to be a bit embarrassing for him, what they'd been about to and why it didn't happen. "But what about, like, Tommy, and Carol and them?"

"You're being paranoid," Steve said. "Why would they tell anyone

about that?"

"What about the whole... prank?" Nancy asked. "They might have complained about it or something. It really... ruined the mood."

He just looked at her, and she shrugged, feeling stupid again for thinking they'd even talk about it. Why would they? Sure, Veronica was a source of a lot of dumb gossip between her parents' death and her own odd habits that no one in Hawkins was willing to give the benefit of the doubt besides... well, Barb.

"I'm sorry," Nancy said, not sure how long she'd been distracted and how crazy she must seem this time, obsessing over Tommy and Carol telling everyone about it.

"No," Steve said, smiling. "No, it's cute. Hey, I had a good time. Even with... you know."

"Yeah," Nancy forced a smile. "Yeah. Me, too."

"Mmm," he said, leaning in for a kiss. She let him, wanting to feel good again, but her doubts were getting worse, and she didn't know what to think right now.

The bell rang, and he gave her another smile before walking off to his own class. She made her way down the hall to first period, knowing she should have gone there sooner, talked to Barb about this already.

She walked in to see Barb's desk empty. She sat down, frowning.

"Hey, Ally," she said to the girl sitting in front of her. "Where's Barb?"

Ally looked at her like she was crazy. "Um, shouldn't you know?"

Nancy normally would have. Last night was different, and this morning—why hadn't she called Barb? Or Veronica? Maybe Barb was there.

"You haven't seen her anywhere at all?"

Ally shook her head, and Nancy's stomach sank.

"That's it. That's where she parked." Veronica pointed to the car as Jonathan slowed down on the street. He probably knew Barb's car, it was a rather distinctively blue and she wasn't sure many other teenagers would drive a VW Rabbit. Not the cool ones, at least. They'd want something nicer, fancier, like Steve's BMW.

"All the way back here?" Jonathan asked, and Veronica nodded, remembering how dumb Nancy had been about them parking over here.

"Nancy didn't want the car seen in his driveway by his neighbors."

"Are you kidding?"

Veronica shook her head. "Both Barb and I thought it was stupid, because we'd be seen walking up, but Nancy insisted. A part of me wishes Barb had just... left her here on her own. I mean, maybe that thing would have taken her, but I don't... Nancy wanted to come. Neither of us did. Barb did because she's worried about her, and I did because... I didn't want to be at the house. Which is a lousy reason to attend a party but better than being afraid of losing my popularity."

She opened her door, getting out. Jonathan followed her, taking his camera out of the trunk and coming around, taking pictures of Barb's car.

"What are you doing?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. It might help, later. I just figured... the car's still here. Locked up. Meaning she didn't run back to it."

He started walking toward the house, snapping a picture here and there as he went along. Veronica followed after him, almost forced to jog to keep pace with him. "So... you believe me that something took her?"

He turned back to face her with a frown. "I don't know, Veronica. I was taking pictures of you, and I didn't see anything."

"What?"

He winced, walking again. "I... I was looking at where they found Will's bike. At first. I wasn't lying about that. I did hear screams and run over, but it was just Carol when Tommy was threatening to throw her in the pool."

"And you stayed and took pictures of us?" Veronica asked, feeling a bit sick. "Damn it, Jonathan, I know you like her, but seriously, that's... kind of fucked up."

He flinched. "I know it is, okay? I told myself it wasn't about that because I didn't just take pictures of her, and I got some nice ones of you, too, but you're right. It's wrong. I just... I feel drawn to her, you know? It's dumb. We haven't really spoken in years, and she pities me now, if anything. She's got Steve. Why would she want me?"

"She's an idiot," Veronica said. "Aside from your stalker tendencies, you're the better guy. You already know how to cook, take care of a house, and raise kids. You'd make a good husband someday. Oh, and bonus points, you can handle the crazies, so you'll be great when it's that time of the month or she gets pregnant or something."

He grimaced. "That's not a compliment."

Veronica snorted. "What, like Steve Harrington has life skills? His parents have money. He's had things handed to him all his life. He drives a BMW and spends way too damned much time on his hair. I had my chance to date guys like him, and it wasn't worth it. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe there's more to him than what I've seen so far, but as far as I can tell, she made the wrong choice."

"And you know so much about relationships," Jonathan said, and he almost sounded like he was teasing her about it. "What about your last boyfriend? The one people think is stalking you and killed people?"

"Okay, so I am not the poster child for a healthy relationship," Veronica said, shrugging. "I fell for a really damaged boy with superpowers. I have issues of my own, but it's easier on the outside looking in. You can see the flaws in other people's relationships easy, you know. When you're in it and feeling it... it's harder."

“Yeah,” Jonathan agreed, pushing open the fence to the backyard. “I don't think we need to get inside the house. She wouldn't have gone back inside.”

“You still don't believe me.”

He sighed. “I don't know what to believe, Veronica. Between you and Mom—”

“Talking to the lights,” Veronica said, and he turned back to face her. “I heard her. You think I slept last night? That thing took Barb, and all I could do was lie there and think about what it might be doing to her... and it if took her... then... is Will dead? Because... it... why would it take her if it still had him? It's... Is this my fault, too? My parents... that was me... but then Will and now Barb...”

Jonathan pulled her into his arms and held onto her as she started crying again. He was so damned strong, even if he didn't know it or look like it. Nancy was an idiot.

Then again, so was Veronica.

Hop regretted having anything to drink last night. He was feeling it again. He knew he wasn't as young as he used to be, when he could shrug that kind of thing off and keep going. The pills weren't helping, he knew that, but the doctors said they would, and he needed them to keep going after this long on them, so it wasn't easy to quit.

Even with all this shit going on. Maybe even because this shit was going on.

He'd said it last night. He felt cursed. Four years of quiet, and then all at once, everything went to hell. Not unlike his own life. He'd had seven good years with his wife, five with his daughter, and then it was all gone in a matter of months.

“There she is,” Powell said as Hop drove the truck closer to the gate, the full shape of Hawkins Lab looming ahead of them. He didn't know what to think of the place. It had been there for years, and no one really paid it much mind, except when the power went out—then

it must be something to do with this place because the Department of Energy ran it.

“Emerald City.”

“I heard they make space weapons in there,” Callahan said, getting a dirty look from Powell.

“Space weapons?”

“Yeah,” Callahan said like what he'd just said wasn't crazy at all. “You know, like, Reagan's Star Wars. I guess we're gonna blow the Ruskies to smithereens.”

Hop shook his head. That was stupid, but then he thought a lot of this was. It wasn't just coming back from 'Nam feeling like they'd done nothing good over there, nothing of use, and it didn't seem worth dying over. None of it did.

He pushed thoughts of Benny out of his head as the MP at the gate spoke to them. God, that took Hop back, too. “Hey, can I help you?”

“Uh, yeah,” Hop said, trying to make this casual. Everyday. Friendly. Nothing like 'Nam or anything around it. “We're here for a tour.”

“Oh, we don't give tours.”

“Okay,” Hop said. “A quick look around.”

“You have to get clearance for that,” the MP answered, and Hop's stomach soured again. He didn't like that word, hadn't since his own days in the army. He respected it, as any soldier did, but that didn't make it any easier to hear. “You can contact Rick Schaeffer at the Department of Energy.”

Hop wasn't going to accept that. No fucking way was he getting turned away at the door, not after Benny ended up dead, Will was still missing, and Veronica's stalker boyfriend was almost certainly guilty of all of that and the fire that killed her parents.

“Maybe you seen it on tv,” Hop said. “We got a local kid that's missing. We have reason to believe he might have snuck in here.”

“Like I said, you have to speak to Mr. Schaeffer.”

To get the government runaround? No way. “What's your name?”

“Patrick.”

“Patrick, I got a panicked mayor, and I got reporters breathing down my neck and I got a very upset mother. Now, I know the kid's not in there, but I gotta check off this box,” Hop said, trying to be charming, even if he wasn't the least bit. He needed to eliminate this lead, that fabric from the drain, so he could go after the real threat, that damned boyfriend. “Would you do me a favor? Would you speak to your boss and see what you can swing for us? I'd really appreciate it. I'm talking ten minutes, tops.”

Nancy made her way to the table where Steve was sitting with Tommy and Carol, still feeling like people were watching her, getting more and more worried by how many classes Barb and Veronica had missed. Sure, Veronica was unlikely to come with her cousin still missing, but Barb? She should be here, and the more she wasn't, the more convinced Nancy was that last night was no prank.

Barb had been taken.

“That's why science doesn't make any damn sense to me,” Tommy said, shaking his head as he picked up his drink. “No, I swear.”

“Look at this,” Carol said, “it's totally frostbite.”

Tommy gagged. “Oh, thanks, man.”

Steve shook his head. “It's a heated pool.”

“Well, if it's not frostbite, then what is it?” Carol asked, pointing to the mark on her foot again. Nancy didn't know what to think of it, but maybe Tommy had given her a hickey in a really weird place. Who knew with them?

It wasn't like something had grabbed Carol, though it should have.

“Ugh, I don't care what it is, it's disgusting,” Steve said, shoving at

her foot. "Get it off the table. We're eating here. Ew."

Carol pulled her leg down, rolling her eyes in annoyance. Tommy just shrugged and went back to eating. Nancy felt uncomfortable being here, even if she was sort of with Steve now. She didn't know that she could eat, worried as she was, and they were just joking around like nothing happened.

She caught sight of Jonathan Byers passing by the hallway, and his eyes met hers for a second. She swallowed. If he was here, did that mean that Veronica was? Should she go after him?

Nancy forced herself to speak into the silence. "Hey, Tommy. When you left, did you see Barb?"

"What?"

"Barbara. She's not here today."

Tommy frowned. "I seriously have no idea who you're talking about."

Nancy glared at him. "Veronica, then. She's not here, either."

"Good riddance to creepy freaks," Carol said. "I swear, everyone in that Byers house is more than a little... off."

Nancy shook her head. That wasn't it at all.

"Come on, don't be an ass, man," Steve said, and Nancy thought he kicked Tommy under the table. "Did you see her leave last night or not?"

"No, she was gone when we left," Tommy said. "She was gone when we came back downstairs, remember? The thing with the face took her."

Carol laughed. "Oh, so scary. Monsters. I bet the only monster in that house is Veronica herself. Or maybe Jonathan. Maybe he did the bad touch on her."

"That's not funny," Nancy said. "It's not like that, and I can't believe you'd say something like that about a girl whose parents died. She..."

she's got issues, but who wouldn't after seeing her parents die like that?"

Carol rolled her eyes. "Like you're not pissed at them for ruining your night last night. Why do you think neither of them are here? They're drawing it out, making it look real and scaring the crap out of you. You're just dumb enough to fall for it."

Nancy frowned. "Barb is not like that. I'm starting to think Veronica was right and something happened to her last night."

"Listen I'm sure she's fine," Steve said. "She might have been upset, and we know Veronica was. She'd even been drinking. She could easily have seen something and gotten spooked by a shadow. Maybe they were both too embarrassed to show up today. That's all it is."

Nancy didn't think it was. She rose, leaving them behind as she hurried over to the hallway. She looked around, not seeing Jonathan anywhere. Damn it. Now what did she do?

She winced and went to the payphone, knowing she had to try and call Barb's house.

"They're on the grounds."

"They won't see anything we don't want them to see," Brenner said, his eyes not leaving the monitors. He was watching the policemen himself, keeping an eye on their progress. He knew that turning them away would have just made more problems. Appearing as though they had nothing to hide was the best, if not the only solution here. The cops would see what they needed and go.

"This is risky," Dyer said, coming up next to him. "We've got too much going on here to expose ourselves like this."

"Would you rather them raise a fuss? They have a scrap of Eleven's hospital gown. They know that a kid passed through that drain. We can either let them disprove that the boy is here for themselves or make our lives more difficult by refusing them. As soon as the body is ready, we will be free of this angle and able to focus on our efforts to

recover Eleven.”

“You realize we're going to have to involve other agencies. This will not be as quiet as you think.”

Brenner was aware of that. “Something else is bothering you.”

“Local chatter.”

“Not buying the suicide? I thought you were good at faking them.”

“I am,” Dyer said, bristling a little. “The suicide is in place, though it has been quite a shock to the community. The man was well liked and the least likely to have taken such an action, it would seem.”

“Unfortunate, but it doesn't mean that it won't be accepted in time.”

“The cop could still be a problem.”

“Then he can succumb to an unfortunate overdose due to his mismanagement of pills and liquor,” Brenner said, not sure why he had to remind her of this sort of thing. “As it is, he should be appeased with his little visit and no longer trouble us.”

Dyer snorted. “You're overestimating his gullibility. Remember, he got close to the Sawyer fire. He knows about the girl's connection to Nine. We have recordings of him asking the girl if Nine was responsible for taking the boy, and at least one person reported seeing a drifter at the diner at the same time as Eleven.”

“You think it was Nine?” Brenner asked, now aware that he'd been unconsciously rubbing the mark on his wrist left behind by the boy's first real show of fire.

“It's possible.”

“What else? There is more, isn't there?”

“The Sawyer girl witnessed another girl be taken by that thing last night.”

“She has no credibility,” Brenner reminded Dyer. “She's a highly

unstable, disturbed young woman thanks to you.”

“That is true. For now, but with two disappearances, a common thread and witness—”

“Perhaps it is time you made your move against Nine,” Brenner said. “Target the girl. I should think that this kind of stress and her unfortunate mental condition would be plenty of grounds for her to... overdose.”

“And if Nine doesn't show before she dies?”

“Well, he would come here to punish us, of course, but I'm sure you can manage an appropriate dosage that leaves her well at risk without killing her.”

22. Chapter 22

Summary for the Chapter:

Veronica's early days in Hawkins are full of missteps.

Theories are developing as people remain missing.

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, so I still haven't gotten to the part where I think I had a solution to not including enough of Eleven's plotline, but I did reach where I'd meant to get to in the last chapter (which would have put that one at 10k, easy.) In fact, there was supposed to be more, but I thought this part was... well, a good stopping point and possibly one of those moments where some thought is required as... well... one of the awkward plotlines got... um... worse? by what I did.

Also... I know nothing about developing photos myself. I always give them to professionals with machines.

October 7

"She's been in Hawkins for almost a week now," Brenner observed. "And yet there's been no sign of him coming for her."

"A bit of a false alarm yesterday," Connie said, having almost sent her team in only to realize that the girl was talking to herself. "The tech thought she was talking to him, since the others were at work and school, but no one spoke back. She must have been talking to herself."

He nodded. "Unfortunate, but not entirely surprising. How long do

you plan on keeping this trap of yours open?"

Connie shrugged. As long as the girl didn't tell anyone about Nine or at least no one would believe her or the truth about that fire, she could theoretically live out the rest of her life here. That said, it would be difficult to control her once she was old enough to get her parents money without a trust, and so their time was limited all the same.

"We have to spring the trap before she turns eighteen and inherits everything free and clear. We don't have a good way of tying up those assets without the trust her lawyer has yet to establish."

"The lawyer is dead, isn't he?"

Connie nodded. "Yes, and he will conveniently turn up that way in a few months when we need him to, but for now we have someone impersonating him and keeping the Byers family from the money so that they cannot move."

"Are you sure Nine will come for her?"

"Aren't you, having heard the tapes?"

Brenner started to pace as he spoke. "He as much as promised to do so, but he should have no concept of a promise or even be capable of such... affection. Nine was always so... difficult. His emotions were never as easy to understand or exploit as the others. He wanted my approval, but I swear he resented it as well."

"And you only now see the mistake in that?"

Brenner gave her a thin smile. "I was willing to risk it when we were still trying to make him viable, and then when he was, albeit in a way we did not expect, he was as dangerous as he was valuable."

She snorted. "What can he do that a soldier with a flamethrower can't?"

"He creates fire without needing a gasoline tank," Brenner began. "No risky chemicals to carry around. He also controls it, how hot it gets, how strong and long it burns. You've seen the tapes. He made

sure those doors fused shut. And then, of course, there's the two biggest factors. His immunity, for one, since he has never burned himself despite everything. And the other... how he manages to disappear within the fire. Is it invisibility? Another facet of the immunity? How does he elude us using those fires? Once we know that, we could truly control him.”

“You delude yourself. What needs to be done is a bullet to that boy's brain, and don't think you can pretend otherwise. He's not something you can salvage. He's too dangerous for that.”

“Then you had better hope this trap of yours works.”

“Veronica?” Joyce asked, keys in hand as she peered into her niece's room. She needed to be sure the girl was all right. When she'd gotten home from work, she'd found her on the floor in the kitchen, and that had worried her all night. She barely slept, and she didn't know what to do.

“Hey, Mom,” Jonathan called from the kitchen. “Breakfast's ready.”

She smiled. “Be right there.”

She crossed over to the other side of Veronica's bed, wanting to face her when they spoke. The girl's eyes were fixed out the window, like she was looking for something or someone. If it was her parents, they were never going to come, which made this so much worse.

She put her hand on Veronica's knee. “Veronica, breakfast is ready.”

Veronica didn't look at her. “Not hungry.”

Joyce winced. The girl was barely eating, skipped dinner the night before and barely had any breakfast. Joyce knew she wasn't feeding herself at lunch because the leftovers were still there. She knew how much food was in her house. She had to, and it wasn't going down as fast as it should.

“Sweetheart, you need to eat.”

“No.”

Joyce would fight that one, but not now. Lunch would be a better opportunity for it. "I think you should come to the store with me today. I don't expect you to do any work, that's my job, but I'm worried about you out here all alone. I think it's better if you're with someone, and maybe if it's not too bad at the store, you can try going to school on Monday. What do you think?"

Veronica shrugged.

Joyce sighed, but she decided she was accepting that as a victory even if it was a lousy one. She gave her another smile. "Well, go ahead and change. I'm going to make sure Will is up and eating, and then I'll come back so you can come with me."

Veronica didn't move, and Joyce grimaced, but she supposed no one outside of them would know that Veronica had worn that outfit the day before and slept in it, too. It wasn't like she smelled, and she'd look messy no matter what since Joyce's clothes were the best bargains she could get, not necessarily the most flattering of looks.

She walked down the hall and found Will already at the table, eating up. She went over and kissed Jonathan's cheek, making him a bit red.

"You're the best."

"Yeah?" he asked, giving her a faint smile as he rubbed at his cheek.

"Yes, and someday I will make all of this up to you," she promised him, knowing she might need until the day she died to do it. "Okay, I'm taking Veronica with me to work today, so—"

"You're taking the creepy one to the store?" Will asked. "Why would you do that?"

"She's not creepy. She's... lost and hurting, and I don't like the idea of her being alone out here. I also figure if she can handle the idiots around the store, she'll be okay with school again, so maybe she can start Monday."

"Good plan," Jonathan said. "She can ride with me if she does."

Joyce gave him a warm smile, hoping this wouldn't be as bad as she

was now afraid it would be. Still, it had to be better than leaving Veronica out here alone.

Hop pulled open the door to the store, grumbling to himself about the list of supplies Flo insisted he be the one to buy. She had all the forms, but she said since she was the only one in the office that actually worked, he could go get her what she needed to do her job.

Honestly, he figured she just wanted those last few doughnuts for herself, since Powell and Callahan were off looking into a complaint about some weird kid showing up on the road and causing Ethel Herne to drive off the road. Chances were, with her eyesight, there wasn't anyone there, but she'd argue with them for the whole day over whether or not there was, so better them than him, even if he lost out on a couple doughnuts that would disappear while the rest of them were gone, despite Flo's assertions she was on a diet.

He walked through the aisles, picking up each thing on Flo's list, thinking she had made this thing up on purpose, filling up a basket with office supplies he was sure they had back at the station. He set it on the counter, and Joyce jumped.

"Sorry," he said, not realizing he'd set off her anxiety with that little thing, but then he should have. He hadn't spoken to her since she found out about Marion, and he should have. "How you doing today, Joyce? You... holding up with everything... you know... Marion and all?"

She blinked, and he frowned as he got a better look at her. Okay, something was wrong with this picture. Her hair was too dark, she wasn't wearing her uniform vest for the shop, and she stared at him like she didn't know who he was.

Even at her worst, grieving her mom and raging against the sister who'd abandoned her and the father that was no longer functioning without his wife, Joyce had never been this bad.

"Joyce?"

"I found it," she called out from the back room, coming out with a

look of triumph on her face and a package in hand. "I knew there was one around here somewhere and—Hop. I didn't hear the bell ring."

He looked from Joyce in her uniform shirt and jeans to the girl behind the counter in the black and almost cursed himself for being an idiot. "I think I spooked your niece a bit."

Joyce grimaced. "Veronica?"

She looked over at Joyce, and he was afraid she might just run to her in fear. She shrugged but didn't move.

"I was just looking for one of these," Joyce said, still awkward. "I told Veronica we had one here, but I couldn't find it until I went in the backroom. Look at you. You have a list. New girlfriend?"

He snorted. "More like second mother. Flo sent me."

She smiled. "Ah, that explains it. Oh, Veronica, this is Jim Hopper. Hop. He's the chief of police. Hop, this is Veronica."

The girl didn't even so much as lift a hand. He tried for a smile. "Nice to meet you."

She turned away, busying herself with the toy or whatever it was her aunt had brought out of the other room. Joyce winced.

"Um... she's still adjusting to being here. I didn't want to leave her out at the house by herself again, but the store isn't exactly the most interesting place on the planet."

Hop nodded, watching as the girl left the counter, going to the window to stare out at it. He lowered his voice. "Damn, Joyce. I had no idea she looked that much like you."

"I know," Joyce said. "It's... a bit strange. I look at her sometimes and see me. Well, me twenty years ago. Poor thing. She's so lost, Hop."

Veronica put her hand on the window, looking like she wanted something or someone out there to be different or maybe just to escape.

"How you doing?" he asked. "With Marion and all..."

"They cremated them. I didn't have to deal with a funeral or anything. They... Would you believe Marion had it all arranged and paid for in advance? They weren't that old."

"Seems a bit odd, but Marion was... Marion."

Joyce nodded. "Yeah. I suppose she thought it was pretentious enough, having that all bought and paid for. Or something. I don't know. I just... I'm worried about Veronica, I haven't been able to be home much at all, and I don't want to push her toward school, but at least then she wouldn't be alone, you know? This can't be good for her."

Joyce bit her lip. He reached over, putting a hand on hers.

"She'll get through this. She's got you."

Joyce flushed. "Oh, I don't know that it helps much, but that's kind of you to say, Hop. Now let's get you rung up before Flo gets really mad at you."

He laughed. "Oh, come on. Nagging me must be her favorite thing to do. You let her lecture me all she wants."

"I think she would lose her voice if she did," Joyce teased, adding up each bit of paper and pencils and those sticky note things Flo liked to annoy him with.

"Probably," Hop agreed. "What's the damage?"

"Thirty-nine fifty," Joyce said, pushing the bag across the counter and taking the basket to add to the ones stacked behind the counter.

He took out forty and passed it to her, looking over at her niece again. Damn, that was strange. She was so like Joyce he'd swear she was her daughter if not her twin.

"They find out what caused the fire?"

"Gas main. It was a horrible, senseless accident," Joyce said, looking

over at Veronica. "Sometimes it doesn't feel real and then I look at her and it all is."

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"And you think this missing boy may have crawled through there?" the head of security asked, frowning at Hop from next to the drain. He said it in a way that made it sound like Hop was a complete moron, which didn't leave him all that charitable toward the man, not that he was in the first place. This was a long shot at best, since even scared and lost Will would have been unlikely to come in here, but if he had, he could have done it through that drain. It wasn't like it was that small where only rodents could get through.

Hell, Joyce and her niece were small enough he figured either one of them could have done it if they had to.

"Well, that was the idea."

"Yeah, I just don't see how that'd be possible," the other man said. "We've got over a hundred cameras. Every square inch covered, plus all my guys. No one breaks in here. Certainly not some kid."

Hop had already figured if Will or anyone else made it in, they knew about it, but he actually thought that was welcome news. The cameras could be just what he needed. "Those cameras, you keep the tapes?"

Judging by the look on the guy's face, he wasn't thrilled with the idea of sharing them, but he forced a smile before talking into his radio. "Hey, Jimmy. Pull up those tapes of the other night, will you?"

"Both nights," Hop said. "He went missing the sixth, but he could have been turned around and lost and come in on the seventh. I need to see both nights."

"The sixth and the seventh," the other man corrected. "We'll be in shortly."

The man gestured toward the doors, and they followed him inside this time. Hop kept his eyes open, watching everything they passed just in case. He knew it wasn't likely he'd get another tour, such as this was. He frowned at the sight of a quarantined area with bio-hazard markings.

"If you don't mind me asking, what do you guys do in here?"

The chief of security just smiled. "You're asking the wrong guy."

Come on, Hop thought. You have to know something. "Staying one step ahead of the Russians?"

"Something like that."

Unhelpful didn't even begin to describe this guy, for all he was pretending to be open and accommodating. "Who's in charge here?"

"That'd be Dr. Brenner."

"And he builds the space lasers?" Callahan asked, and Powell looked like he wanted to smack the younger man.

"Space lasers?"

Hop gave the security chief the best advice anyone would ever give him when it came to Callahan. "Ignore him."

The other man nodded, opening a door for them and leading them into a room full of television monitors. "All ready for us, Jimmy?"

"Yes," the tech at the chair answered. "These are all the cameras near the drain. I'll play the video now. We sped it up to give a lapse of the whole night."

He pushed play, and the video played back, one lonely boring ass view of the pipe, never changing, not even for a second. A few other angles had glimpses of people moving about, but there was nothing near the pipe at all through any of the time it played.

"This is the night of the sixth and seventh we're seeing here?"

Jimmy nodded. "That's correct."

"Is that it?"

The chief of security nodded. "Like I said, we would have seen him. Let me show you out."

Hop didn't protest as they were led back to the doors. His mind was going mile a minute, and he wanted to say something, but he wasn't going to do it here, while they were being escorted. No, not here. Soon.

"Chief?" Powell asked as they got outside, knowing something was up.

"The night of the seventh, we had a search party out for Will," Hop said, wondering if either of them had noticed what he did. "You remember anything about that night?"

Callahan thought about it. "Mmm, not much to remember. Called it off."

"Cause of the storm," Powell said, and it looked like the light bulb went on for him, though not necessarily for Callahan.

"Yeah, a lot of rain that night."

"You see any rain on that tape?" Hop asked. He sure as hell hadn't. Neither night had any damned rain on the tapes.

Powell studied him. "What are you thinking?"

"I don't know," Hop admitted, because he wasn't sure what, if anything, this meant, "but they're lying."

Barb jerked awake when something snapped near her, and she bumped the tree behind her, her breath coming in pants as she looked around for that thing that had chased them through the night. She swallowed, not seeing it anywhere.

The flames had died down, though their mark remained on the

ground around them. She reached over and shook the boy, afraid he was dead. No fire, that thing out there, he must be, right? And how was she supposed to find a way out of here or stay alive if he was dead? She didn't have any illusions about her odds. She didn't have shoes, fire hurt that thing but she couldn't create it like he did, and she had no idea how she got in here or how to get out.

She needed him, this strange boyfriend of Veronica's. Even if he was lying about killing her parents, Barb needed him alive until they were free of this place.

"Wake up," she said, shaking him harder until he groaned and lashed out, smacking her hand into the tree. "Ouch."

He opened his eyes, took in what he'd done, and grimaced. "Um... sorry."

"I guess waking you is a bad thing to do."

He thought about that for a second. "Generally speaking, waking up wasn't ever very good. Except... when I was with Veronica. That was nice. She smelled good and was soft and didn't mind inappropriate reactions. Said they were normal."

Barb grimaced. "Do you have any idea how you sound?"

"Like a freak?" he offered. "That's what Bud always told me. That I was born a lab freak and would be a freak until I died but he could accept that, unlike most. Veronica said he wasn't very good, which I knew, but it was different when she said it... she made me think there were better people out there, which I'd never seen before her."

Barb winced. That was awful if it was true. "You sound a bit better."

"Sleep helps, though... I wouldn't have thought it would make any difference here," he admitted, reaching down to scratch at his wrist. "This place is more wrong than I am. And it doesn't like me. I can... feel that."

"Well, judging by what fire does around here, I think I could almost see that," Barb agreed. She looked at the scorched ground and back at him. "Why didn't it kill us when we fell asleep?"

He shook his head. "Not sure. Might have found someone else. Might have been too afraid of the fire. Not sure how that thing works. Will called it a Demogorgon. I don't know what it is."

"But we know it hunts blood and tracks us," Barb said, lifting up her foot to look at the bottom of it. He leaned over to peer at it and grimaced. "Yeah, the more I walk, the worse that will get. It'll be able to track us unless you burn my feet, too, and if you do—"

"Too much pain to walk on," he said, and she frowned. "I did it to stop a soldier chasing me once. He screamed. It... It was better than lighting all of him on fire but before I knew that nothing would stop them coming but death."

"You've killed people? How many?"

He sighed. "I don't... if they'd just leave me alone, I wouldn't have to, but there's not much else I can do against their guns but burn them, and I just... I figured out all I want is my hamster and Veronica. Maybe a dog. And a sax. I heard someone play one once and it was really nice. Soothing. Not like the stuff they made me listen to at the lab or Bud's awful music. I didn't know before Veronica. I thought... life with Bud was as good as it got, but they still hunted me... and the boys at school... I only burned them but they were calling me a fag and I thought they were going to... well... and I panicked. Which is kind of my problem now that I think about it. I don't think enough, but... it's hard when there's not much time and it's kill or be killed and... I'm really scaring you right now, aren't I?"

Barb swallowed, wishing it hadn't shown. She needed him, but she didn't want him knowing he was pretty much terrifying. Not that he didn't seem to have reasons to fight back and it sounded like most of the killing was done in self-defense, but there was this... disconnect with him, like he didn't understand all the implications of it, and that with what he could do was very dangerous. He was like a big child, and that was also a problem.

He looked out at the trees. "I think I can maybe get you back out of this place, but you won't be able to go home."

"What?"

“Where were you all night?”

“In a creepy place with vines and a monster and—okay, admittedly, that sounds crazy.”

“How did you get out of that place? How did you survive the monster without your glasses and in bare feet?”

“Um... With your help,” Barb said. “And somehow that's worse than the rest of it, isn't it?”

He nodded. “Veronica's bait. They don't need you. They'd kill you if you said anything about me. So where were you last night? If it's not still night. It's hard to tell here.”

It was, but she couldn't let that distract her. “So... you can get us out, but if I go home, I could still end up dead.”

“They probably already know the monster took you. Veronica was there. She saw it.”

“Everyone thinks Veronica is nuts.”

He shrugged. “Doesn't matter. They'd still want to talk to you, and what would you tell them? That this place exists but some freak with fire got you out? You're just asking to die that way.”

“Thanks a lot.”

He frowned, thinking back on what he'd said, and then shrugged again. “I'm not here to be nice. That was never my... function. Also... there is a chance getting us back will... hurt. Both of us. Not just me, but definitely me and... so if I do this... you can accept all that?”

Barb frowned. “Are you asking if I'm going to panic or if I'm going to turn you in or what?”

He grunted. “Okay, fine. This could kill us both, and even when we get back, it won't be easy. Is that enough? That clear? Okay. Good. My head hurts, so make up your mind. You want to risk it or not?”

“How are we going to get out? That firewalk thing you talked

about?"

"Yeah."

"You said you can't control it here."

"Exactly. We could die. I said that, too."

Barb looked around at the dead woods and thought about the monster and told herself she was braver than this. "Fine. Let's try it."

Joyce finished hanging her new lights, looking up at the colors stretched across the house. She had never decorated this much for an actual Christmas, but the lights were beautiful, in their way, and they'd be even better if they made it so that Will could really talk to her. She wanted to know he was alive and safe.

She wanted to get him home.

She rubbed her head, knowing there'd be more stories around town about how crazy she was, and she hadn't even told anyone about what Veronica had told her. A conspiracy with a lab that experimented on children and created a boy who could create fire who had set the fire at her sister's house but hadn't killed her... Joyce wasn't sure which one of them was crazier, her with her lights or Veronica.

Jonathan would probably say her right now, but only because he didn't know about the rest of it.

She heard a knock on the door and ran for it, hoping it was Will come home or someone else who knew about his condition. Hop. It could be Hop. That would be great.

She opened the door to Karen Wheeler and her daughter and had to force a smile. "Oh, hey. Hey, Karen."

"Hi," Karen said with a smile. "I brought you a casserole."

Joyce blinked, trying to understand what the hell she was going to do with that. Why did she need a casserole? She didn't. She swore

Jonathan was the only one making even a token effort to eat, and barely that.

“Oh, thank you,” Joyce said, remembering her manners. “You... want to come in?”

She saw Karen looking at the lights and knew the other woman was thinking she was crazy. She forced a smile as she went for her cigarettes. “Will always loved Christmas, you know. So I thought if I I put the lights up I don't know—I'd feel like he was home somehow. It's silly, I know.”

“No,” Karen said in that voice that was clearly humoring Joyce, one she hated but for all that they were 'friends,' the other woman had no comprehension of Joyce or her life. “No, it's not silly. How is Jonathan holding up?”

Better than any of the rest of them, for now, at least. Joyce knew when it hit him, it would hit hard, but he was keeping himself busy taking care of her and Veronica, so he didn't feel it at all. “You know, he's good at taking care of himself. He always has been, you know? I mean, he thinks I'm losing my mind, but—”

She stopped, thinking she saw the lights flicker. Will? Damn, now was not a good time for that.

“Is something the matter?” Karen asked, watching her with concern.

“Uh, no,” Joyce tried to be casual in spite of everything. “No, I just—We're having electrical problems.”

Could that be something to do with the place being bugged? Was that why it was so hard to communicate with Will? Outside interference?

“Joyce,” Karen began, taking on a very serious tone. “I want you to know something. If you need anything, anything at all Ted and I are here for you.”

“Thank you,” Joyce said, not sure what they thought they could really do for her. Ted? Really? Lonnie was at least obvious about how useless he was. Ted seemed like a good guy, but he hadn't been there much for Karen, and they all knew it. “Thanks.”

“Okay.”

“How how's Mike dealing with this? Is he, uh, okay?”

“Mike? Uh, I don't know. He skipped school yesterday,” Karen admitted. “He's never done anything like that before.”

Joyce frowned, remembering her own conversation with Hop, saying the same thing about Will. They weren't the kind of boys to play hookie. Something was going on.

The oven beeped, and Karen rose. “Let me throw in that casserole, okay?”

Joyce nodded, not sure when they'd even turned on the damned oven.

“Oh, where's Holly?”

Joyce frowned, hurrying down the hall to find the girl in Jonathan's room, looking at the wall. She saw it just for a moment, the wall doing something strange.

“Hey,” she said, grabbing Holly. “She shouldn't be here.”

“Oh, I'm sorry,” Karen said, taking Holly from her. “She's quite the explorer these days.”

Holly was pointing at the wall, staring, and Joyce knew that it was probably something like what she'd seen last night.

“Wait, did you see something?”

“Yeah,” the three year old answered with innocence, having no comprehension of what it really was she'd seen.

“What did what did you see? Tell me,” Joyce told the girl, needing to know if the wall had done that thing again. “What did you see? What —”

“Joyce,” Karen said, using the 'you're acting crazy' voice. “Joyce.”

"Listen, Karen, thank you for the casserole, but I need you to leave," Joyce said, wanting her out of the house. Now. They could pretend at being friends some other time. Right now, she needed to find her son, and she was going to use these lights to do it.

She didn't care how crazy that made her.

"So, should I say something about you getting lost in Nancy Wheeler again?"

Jonathan flushed. He hadn't even meant to look when they passed by the cafeteria. The idea was to develop all the pictures he'd taken and find out if there was anything at all useful on the roll. He couldn't afford an overnight place and didn't want to wait, not when he could do it now.

"No. You shouldn't. Just drop it, Veronica, okay? I should have left you in the car while I did this."

She snorted. "Like you would. I'm too crazy to be unsupervised right now. I wish I was even slightly capable of keeping my moods even. I don't like being a damned yo-yo, but I am. I'm up and down and all over the place because of this stuff. I think I understand. I think I know what I'm doing, or I've just come to terms with being nuts, and I'm fine for a few minutes and then something else comes along and knocks me right off balance again. It's stupid and wrong, but it's my life right now."

He grimaced, not sure how to respond to that. He stopped at the door. "Here. This is it. The darkroom."

"I didn't even know the school had one of these."

Jonathan looked over at Veronica, shaking his head as he flipped on the switch for the darkroom, shrouding it in a red light that had her tensing up. "Something throwing you off-balance again?"

"You remember when I said he... um... saved me from the fire?"

Oh, hell. Jonathan didn't think he wanted to hear this. He turned and made himself busy, preparing the solutions for development. "What

about it?"

"When he did... we went into this place that was... red. Like this. All red. It was... strange. Still. Quiet. Completely... dead. Only not dead... just... empty. Empty and red. He called it a firewalk."

"What does that mean?" Jonathan asked, taking care with each tub, hoping he wouldn't screw this up because of what she was saying. It was pretty crazy again.

"He could go into that place through a fire... and come out somewhere else."

Jonathan almost dropped the bottle. "That... Veronica, that sounds impossible."

She shook her head. "What if it isn't, Jonathan? What if it's the key to everything?"

He set the chemicals aside, taking out his film. This was something he enjoyed doing. It was soothing, though usually he was alone and he wasn't talking to his cousin about something that was completely insane.

"It's not."

"No, please," Veronica said. "I know I have been... unstable, but I'm sure of what happened that night before I found myself on the lawn and they drugged me. Okay? That part is very, very clear, even the part that should seem wrong and like a dream or hallucination when we were doing that firewalk thing. It was a different place. We were in my bedroom and then we weren't. We were in that red area. And then... he let go of me and I fell out in my backyard. That's where they found me. The lab people. Now... think about it. Will was there, and then he was gone. Barb was there, and then she was gone."

Jonathan frowned. He forced himself through the motions of the first film, making the print. "I thought you said it wasn't you boyfriend."

"It's not," Veronica said. "I know it's not. He wouldn't hurt Barb or Will, but that thing... what if it can do something like his firewalk? What if... that's what it did to them? Took them somewhere else?"

Jonathan finished the print, hanging it up and starting the next one. "That sounds—"

"Crazy. I know, but we're not dealing with something normal here. That thing is not human. I know it's not. I know what I saw. And remember how your mom thinks she's talking to Will through the lights?"

Jonathan wished she hadn't reminded him of that. "Veronica, please. Mom is... she's not well. She's coping with this... so badly. Worse than you, even, and that is just—"

"It might not be as crazy as you think if Will's stuck in a place like that," Veronica said. "He wouldn't be able to talk to her directly, but he's still giving her a sign he's there."

Jonathan shook his head. "I know you want to make this better, but this isn't helping. We're just going to finish these pictures and go."

She sighed and looked away, shaking her head in disgust. He ignored her as he finished his work, wishing he could speed up the process, but he needed to do this right so that they got photos they could actually use.

He hung a few more up, working on the next batch when the door opened. They turned, seeing Nicole there. She gave them a smile.

"Hey," she said, taking something off the shelf. She looked up at the line, and he grimaced when he realized those ones were some of the ones he shouldn't have taken.

Jonathan grabbed the pictures off the line and took his cousin's arm, pulling her with him out of the darkroom as quickly as he could.

"Isn't that red light supposed to mean 'do not enter?'" Veronica asked as he led her back toward the car. "That is what it means, right? Someone could risk exposing your negatives or something. She shouldn't have come in at all."

"Not surprised. It's the kind of 'thoughtless' bitchiness they all think they can get away with, her and the other girls. Let's just go. We should have what we need since I did the roll backwards."

Veronica nodded. "Okay."

Hop sent Callahan off to take charge of the volunteers, keeping Powell with him as he drove over to the library. He knew that they needed more information, and when it came right down to it, Powell was less likely to buy into anything too over the top, unlike Callahan and his space lasers.

He still needed to get back to the boyfriend angle, but he had something a bit more concrete and a little less likely to end up in a hysterical crying fit in the Hawkins Lab angle, and he'd like to eliminate it if he could. Or know what the hell was going on there. They were definitely lying.

He parked the truck in front of the library and got out, walking up with Powell into the building. The woman at the desk looked up at them.

He forced a smile. "Hey, Marissa. How you doing?"

"You have a lot of nerve showing up here."

He frowned. This was a public place. He needed information. He was the police chief.

"What?"

"You could have at least called, said, 'Marissa, hey, it's not gonna work out. Sorry I wasted your time. I'm a dick.'"

He could only nod to that. All very true and that much worse because he didn't think he remembered hooking up with her. "Yep. I'm sorry. Uh... Maybe we could go out again next week?"

She glared at him.

He swallowed. "Newspapers? You guys got newspapers around here?"

She rose, making a bit of a huff noise as she led them toward the back of the library. He tried to remember when they'd been together

and how it went, but he couldn't. Must have been a night where the alcohol did most of the thinking and the talking, and he was actually surprised she'd fallen for it.

She stopped in front of a file cabinet full of little drawers. "We have the New York Times, the Post, all the big ones. Organized by year and topic. You can find the corresponding microfiche in the reading room."

"Okay, we're looking for anything on the Hawkins National Laboratory," Hop said, hoping she'd help them narrow that down, even if she was pissed at him.

She eyed him like he was scum. "Well, shouldn't you be looking for that missing kid?"

"Yeah. We are," he told her but didn't explain. He didn't know that the fabric scrap, the kid at Benny's diner, or the video tapes without rain would convince her. "Uh, so, why don't you start with the Times, and we'll check out the Post?"

She made another noise as she walked away.

Powell gave him a look. "The librarian?"

Hop could only shrug. Pills and booze was a bad combination, and arguably, going through all the single women in town was worse, but he hadn't realized just how bad things were until now.

That would change. He wasn't going to drink again while Will was out there, wouldn't have last night if he hadn't been dealing with Benny's death, and Sandra... well, that was all part of it, but he'd fix this. Somehow.

"Let's just find those damned newspapers."

Veronica walked with Jonathan out to the parking lot. No one here hassled them in the halls, not like Westerburg where Fleming would have been out demanding hall passes and she would have been holding a forgery at the ready, needing to avoid detention or impress some idiotic popular girls she thought were friends.

Her cousin was in such a hurry that they hadn't looked at any of the pictures yet, and she was a bit worried they wouldn't have all they needed because he'd rushed them out of there, but she hoped what they did have was enough. She wanted to find Barb and Will, and she knew that she wouldn't be able to do much until someone stopped thinking she was crazy.

They were almost at Jonathan's car when he slowed down, a frown on his face. She swallowed. Great. Steve and his jerk friends, including Nicole this time around, just no Nancy.

Fuck. Veronica knew that wasn't a good sign.

"Hey, man," Steve said in greeting, a false smile on his face.

"What's going on?" Jonathan asked, gesturing to them blocking his car.

"Nicole here was, uh, telling us about your work."

Carol nodded. "We've heard great things."

"Yeah, sounds cool," Tommy agreed, not at all convincing.

"And we'd just love to take a look," Steve said, still playing at being nice. "You know, as connoisseurs of art."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jonathan said, trying to move past them.

"Oh, no?" Steve asked, grabbing his bag and trying to yank it out of his hands. They struggled over it, but Tommy helped Steve pull it away.

"Please, give me my bag," Jonathan said, reaching for it again. "No, just—"

"Man, he is totally trembling," Steve said. "He must really have something to hide."

Veronica grimaced. The pictures of Jonathan's stalker side were in there, too, not just the ones they'd taken looking for Barb.

"Here we go," Steve said, lifting the pictures out of the bag. "Oh, man."

"Let me see," Tommy said, leaning over to get a look, taking them out of Steve's hands. "Dude."

"Yeah, this isn't creepy at all," Carol muttered, eying Jonathan like he was something to be stepped on and squished.

"I was looking for my brother," Jonathan said. "And Barb. This isn't —"

"No," Steve corrected, angry. "No, this is called stalking."

"What's going on?" Nancy asked, coming up to them, a frown on her face. She looked at Jonathan and then the others.

"Here's the starring lady."

"What?"

"Your friends are assholes, that's what this is," Veronica said, glaring at Tommy and Steve. "They won't get the fuck off Jonathan's car."

"That's not all, is it, Veronica?" Carol asked. She shook her head. "This creep was spying on us last night."

"He was probably gonna save this one for later," Tommy said, holding up one where Nancy had been in the window taking off her shirt.

Damn it.

"Look, forget the pictures of the party," Veronica said. "Just give us back the ones of Barb and her car and the rest of it. We need them to find her."

"Oh, please. That lie again?" Carol snorted. "I don't think so. You can't cover up for your cousin's sickness with your little looney act."

"See, you can tell that he knows it was wrong," Steve said, taking back the pictures and tearing them up, dropping them on the ground,

“but that's the thing about perverts. It's hardwired into 'em. You know, they just can't help themselves. So we'll just have to take away his toy.”

Steve grabbed the camera out of Jonathan's bag.

Nancy grimaced. “Steve—”

“No, please, not the camera,” Jonathan said, and Veronica knew as much as he'd done the wrong thing taking those pictures of Nancy and the party, if Steve broke that camera, he'd be destroying a part of Jonathan's soul.

“Give it back,” she ordered. “Now. You already tore up the pictures. It's enough.”

Tommy took it from Steve. “I don't think so. You're a psychotic little drama queen, and he's a perv, and you probably like that he's a perv, but this camera—”

“No, no, wait, Tommy,” Steve said. He took the camera back. “It's okay. Here you go, man.”

He held the camera out to Jonathan, but as soon as Jonathan reached for it, he let it fall, shattering on the ground. Steve smirked, giving a shrug like it was an accident.

The others laughed.

“Asshole.” Veronica lunged for him, wishing she had a croquet mallet. Tommy caught her, pulling her away from Steve before she could hurt him. “Get the fuck off of me.”

“Oh, look at her defend her perv cousin. I bet they are screwing each other,” Carol said, shaking her head. “Gross.”

“I don't care what stupid pictures he took, you bastards. That doesn't make you breaking his stuff any more right. You're just fucking bullies, and I have had enough of high school bullies, believe me,” Veronica said, ramming her elbow into Tommy's gut as hard as she could. He groaned, and she turned around to face him, kneeling him in the groin.

Steve yanked her away from the other boy, pushing her back toward Jonathan, smart enough not to try and hold her.

“Fuck, she really is psycho.”

“Veronica,” Nancy said, looking up from the torn pieces of the pictures. “Don’t—”

“Don’t you fucking start with me, either,” she said, shaking her head. “Barb didn’t even want to go to that party last night. She went for you. She stayed because she was worried about you. And because she cared about you and you were too damned stupid to see past some jock’s pretty hair, she’s gone. She could be dead. You ignored that for your asshole friends. I don’t care how crazy I am. Or how idiotic what Jonathan did was. None of this is right, and those jerks just destroyed our best chance of finding Barb. And you... you just stood there.”

Nancy scooped up the pieces of the picture of Barb, biting her lip.

“Veronica,” Jonathan said, touching her arm. “Come on. We should go.”

“She doesn’t get a pass because you like her,” Veronica said. “I was just as guilty of the stuff the Heathers did as they were when I was with them, and don’t think I don’t know that. Nancy can stand there and lie to herself all she wants, but I know better. I lived that life. I know what she is. And I know what it cost. Go on. Get the fuck out of here.”

“You gonna fight us all now?” Carol asked, looking up from Tommy, who was still moaning like a baby. “Really?”

“Haven’t you heard?” Veronica countered. “I’m the lunatic that burned down my house and killed my own parents. Or did you forget that one in all those tales you told about me? You really want to push me now? Because I’m starting to think... what the hell? I’m always going to be seen as a complete psycho, so why shouldn’t I embrace that? I would love to see all of you burn.”

“Veronica, please,” Jonathan said. “This isn’t helping.”

She looked up at him. “Maybe not, but it felt pretty damned good.”

23. Chapter 23

Summary for the Chapter:

Nine discovers a few things about Hawkins.

Nancy looks for Barb, and other unpleasant discoveries are made.

Notes for the Chapter:

I really struggled with this one. It was part uncertainty over some changes and a character's actions, part a nagging plot hole I can't resolve, and part just the usual insecurities. I was all happy to find a place to connect with Eleven's path again, and then it wasn't a good chapter ending... and it's a mess again. Or at least I am.

October 7

He'd found how close Veronica's house was to the lab by accident. He had followed the car to the end of the driveway, and further down, too, to a turn in the road that was right next to the fence for the lab. He'd recoiled a bit and almost got himself run over.

He could not stay near this house, not without risking being caught, and it would be too easy for them to come. They wouldn't even have to use the roads. They could come off their own land, and no one would know.

That, and the damned dog was trying to tell everyone that he was there, barking all the time, and while he knew Veronica would feed him, the others were not friends. Might not be able to trust them, and if she couldn't, and he took food from them, he would bring the lab down on Veronica.

No, he had to get food elsewhere, and he had to find a place to sleep that was not their sheds. The dog was one problem, the others in the house would also be a danger to him. They could come looking at

any moment, and he could only escape if he lit a large fire.

He needed somewhere else to stay in Hawkins. Someplace the lab would not look for him and he could still be near enough to Veronica to help her if she needed him.

He didn't know Hawkins. He'd never been out in the town, not before the fire that freed him, and even that wasn't really the same. He'd seen very little before he passed out, and he had slept for days after that first firewalk.

He'd woken in the woods with some kind of animal licking his face—he'd almost killed it, since it scared him so much and he'd thought that it was going to eat him, having never known animals of any kind before except the ones Papa wanted him to hurt, to... burn.

He shuddered, turning away from the road. He knew it was not safe on them. He needed a map, but he did not think he should go inside the house. If they were listening, they knew the family was gone. They'd know if he went inside.

He turned back into the woods. He did not like trees much, even if they were good for burning. They made wonderful fires, and he could use them, but if he did, it might be seen. He couldn't be found, not before he had a way to make sure Veronica was safe from the lab forever.

He wanted to take her away from here, but he couldn't do that now.

He didn't have anywhere to go. Bud's money was not endless, and he would be out of it soon enough. He'd given more to Kali than he liked, but then he didn't know that he was going to live past that trip.

He still hurt from being shot, and he needed to eat. He was starving.

He would have to find a safe way to get supplies, too.

A safe place to return to would be a start.

He could make it a few more hours without food.

He found the cabin by accident. He was a freak made in a lab, and he had no sense of direction. Bud had told him that many times when he asked about where they were going and how they would get there and which way to go.

He was trying to learn, but Bud was a dick who didn't want him knowing things and insulted him for fun. He understood it now even more than he had then. Being with Bud was in some ways like being with Papa, and it was simple enough to fall back into old roles. He'd comforted himself with the idea that he was safe, that Bud was a shield and a way to avoid the lab finding him, but he was almost as bad, maybe worse, and it had not been worth it, not when he looked at it now.

He had money, at least, so he would use it.

It would help if he knew where the hell he was, but he didn't.

He forced the cabin's door open anyway, finding stuff stacked everywhere, like it was just a place where someone dumped everything they didn't want, with most of the furniture covered up in sheets. He looked at that and the amount of dust and cobwebs and figured no one had been here in years.

That worked for him. An abandoned building had proven to be shelter before, and it could be now. He wasn't terribly picky as far as that went. He had liked Veronica's bed, it was nice and soft and had good company, but he'd slept in worse places with worse people, and this one wasn't a place he'd have to share.

He walked around, pushing things out of the way to get to the wood stove. He'd seen one of these before, and he knew what it was for, which made him smile. Hmm. Fire in a stove wouldn't seem that odd. Just someone using the cabin like maybe they were supposed to.

He wasn't supposed to, but it would be less noticeable than a big fire in the woods.

He opened the cover to find there was still wood in it, so he lit it up, starting a flame with his mind with no small bit of satisfaction. He liked doing that, probably would never stop even though he was

being hunted for it.

He frowned when he stepped back, looking at the fire. He knew that feeling. He knew what it was, and it shouldn't be happening now. He held out his hand, letting it feel the energy, and he swore he could do it. Here. Now. He could firewalk using that little fire there in the stove.

He knew that shouldn't be possible, but he was almost tempted to try it anyway.

He swallowed. This was insane, but... what the hell? He had very little to lose, and if he was stronger now and it took less fire to firewalk, that was a good thing, right?

He could at least go get some food, right?

He should go to a store, get enough food to last a few weeks just in case. Of course, he couldn't cook, even if that one corner of the cabin looked like it might be a kitchen. He would have to learn, but that could come later.

First he was going to see if he was right about the firewalk, then he could get food, and maybe after that, he could get Veronica.

He smiled to himself, pleased by the idea, and then he moved forward into the fire.

He saw red, but it flashed with something else, something strange and dark, and the whole thing was unsettling, and then he fell out, finding himself in front of a convenience store. He laughed at himself as he got up, feeling a bit strange but not quite as drained as he usually was when he did this. Everything about this firewalk was easier, if weirder, and he was still not sure what to think of it. He would need to test more, or maybe he was dreaming, except his dreams were either bright red like the world of the firewalk... or horrible memories he didn't want to relive, but he did, and he made them worse.

He shook off the thought and went inside the store. He started with a

slushie, filling it up and drinking from it as he went around picking what he wanted, taking all the chips and other things he liked that wouldn't go bad if he had to leave them behind or got stuck somewhere. He was glad he'd forgotten to take off his bag when he went into the firewalk, because he'd need it to carry all of this plus a few more.

"Geez, buddy. You high or what?"

He had been asked that before, and he hadn't known what it meant, but he'd learned. He took out two bills and put them on the counter. "Does it even matter?"

"Not if you're paying for it," the clerk admitted, grinning at him as he started ringing it up. "Though it looks like you've got a super case of the munchies."

He snorted. "This is nothing. I'm not even that hungry."

"Yeah? You one of those weirdos that makes themselves puke it up or something? Because you're too skinny to eat all this."

"I burn it off," he said, which was true, though he knew from experience the man wouldn't understand him. He did use up the calories with what he did to create fire, but Bud had explained most people would think he meant he exercised.

He'd seen Bud exercise a lot, and the guy was really proud of it, like it made him big and strong, but he was just a bully.

He didn't think much of exercise, and that was all Bud's fault.

"Not bad."

He shrugged, taking his haul with him out the door, knowing this wouldn't last all that long. He just couldn't carry enough with him through the firewalk.

He started eating chips as he walked, needing to figure out where he'd ended up this time. He didn't recognize it, but then he'd wanted somewhere they wouldn't look for him, so that made sense.

He wondered if there was a place he could find a map of Hawkins without getting too close to the town itself. He should try the library, though he doubted the one here had what he needed, and going to Hawkins' library would be too dangerous.

But who knew what was in that cabin? Maybe he should go through more of it.

Okay, fine. Time to go back.

He figured he could manage it because he didn't feel that bad, so he started a fire in a trashcan and waited. No, nothing. That sense wasn't there. He couldn't firewalk off that, and it hurt the way it always did, unlike the fire at the cabin.

Shit. It was something about being in Hawkins, wasn't it? That was why it had been so easy. It wasn't him. It was something there, something with the lab.

He shuddered, killing the fire in the trashcan before looking for something much bigger to burn.

November 9

"Come on, Nancy," Steve said, "the game's about to start."

Nancy swallowed, torn and shaken by Veronica's words. Was that true? Had she really lost her best friend because she was too focused on Steve? Or was that just Veronica being... Veronica? She'd been so angry, so out of control there that it was scary, and seeing her like that, Nancy could almost believe that the other girl had done something terrible like murder her parents.

And yet, seeing Veronica's attempt to comfort Jonathan as he picked up the broken pieces of his camera, Nancy wasn't so sure that Veronica was as crazed as she'd just seemed. Angry, yes, she was still very, very angry, but she'd only gone after Tommy after he pulled her away from Steve, who had broken Jonathan's camera.

Nancy knelt down and gathered up some of the pieces of the

photographs, seeing Barb in the one on the top.

She gathered them into her hands, meeting Jonathan's eyes for a minute before he turned away, apparently ashamed.

He should be, if he really was stalking her, and that picture—but he and Veronica actually cared what happened to Barb, whereas the others kept telling Nancy she was off playing a prank Nancy knew she'd never be any part of.

“Let's go,” Steve repeated, pulling her along by the arm, and she let herself be led away, still trying to sort out her thoughts.

Could it be something really, really wrong, where Jonathan and Veronica had teamed up to do something awful to Barb? Veronica was the one to tell them all that Barb had been taken by a man without a face, but what if it wasn't some other man but Jonathan? He'd been there taking pictures. Could Barb have seen something she shouldn't have?

Or was it exactly what Veronica said it was and someone without a face—a mask, maybe?—had taken Barb? If they had, and Nancy hadn't done anything last night, no one had... did that mean Barb was already dead?

Was that her fault, like Veronica said it was? Barb hadn't wanted to go to that party. She hadn't wanted to be there, and she'd only gone and stayed because Nancy went. Veronica had gone because of Barb, but that meant her being there was kind of because of Nancy as well.

Sure, they might have been mad at her for that, but Veronica seemed to be enjoying herself at Carol's expense, and it was only after Barb had cut her finger that—oh. Barb's finger. Another thing that was Nancy's fault, since she'd pushed Barb to do it.

Could they have gotten so upset that Barb agreed to let Veronica get revenge by saying she'd been taken? But if she had... she would have fessed up to it by now. Barb wasn't the sort of person who did this kind of thing. If she was unhappy with what you were doing, she told you.

"So, I told Mr. Mundy, 'the solution of ten plus Y equals... blow me,'" Carol said, and Nancy blinked, not sure how long she'd been lost in thought, though they were inside now, and Carol was lying next to Tommy, looking very comfortable as she told her story. He didn't really look comfortable, but then Veronica had gotten in some good hits.

"Bull," Steve said. "If you did that, you'd be in detention right now."

Carol smirked. "Saturday."

Tommy snorted. "I bet Mr. Mundy's still a virgin."

"Oh, he's so a virgin," Carol agreed, laughing.

"Maybe you should blow him, Carol," Tommy suggested. "Help your grades a bit."

Nancy shook her head, unable to stand here while they talked about stupid bullshit like that when her friend was missing and it could be her fault. Even if all she managed now was to find Barb and apologize—which was somehow best case scenario when she had a feeling it was nothing like that, seeing as her mom said she hadn't been home yet—that was worth it.

"Whoa, Nance," Steve called to her, "where you going?"

"I..."

"Come on," he said, rising. "Don't let that girl get to you. She's nuts. You know that. Wall do. You tried to be nice to her, and look what she did in return. It's not your fault. Remember, she's probably not even missing."

Except her mom hadn't seen her. Barb hadn't gone home. Nancy had made up some stupid lie about the library when Barb was not there.

"No, I... I totally forgot," she said. "I told my mom I would, um, I would do something with her."

"What do you mean? The game's about to start."

She could care less about a game right now. She had to go find Barb. She had to see Steve's house for herself. She had to do something. "I'm sorry."

She started running, wondering if Jonathan and Veronica would still be in the parking lot.

"When I get the money from my parents, I'll buy you the best camera you can get," Veronica said, and Jonathan looked over at her across the car. "I'm serious. I will. I want to. I—I'm so mad at them right now. I... I'm going to get you a better one than you had, the best. And all you have to do is promise me you won't take any stalkery pictures again."

He snorted. "I don't... I never meant to do it. It was just... I was there, the camera was in my hands... I should have resisted, and I didn't. I messed up. I... I can't tell you how much I would rather not feel the way I do about her, especially after today."

"Hearts are stupid things," Veronica said, pulling her knees up against her chest. "Just look at mine."

Jonathan wasn't sure it was her heart that was in the wrong, seeing as so much hung on whether or not her mind was gone, not her heart. Sure, she thought she loved this guy, but no one could even prove that he existed. What if she had made him up? His abilities were more than a little hard to believe, and the whole thing sounded nuts.

Now she thought she had the answer to where Will and Barb were, and it was all because of the things this guy could supposedly do, and Jonathan didn't think that was even possible.

Not to mention that she'd scared him when she went after Steve and Tommy like that. Oh, he knew his mom could be fierce when she wanted to be, and it was a bit like watching her fight someone, but still... The last time someone grabbed her like that, she'd panicked. He'd seen it.

Only this time she hadn't panicked, she'd turned on Tommy and

almost kicked his ass. That was not what he'd expected, not at all.

"You didn't have to do that, you know," he told her. "What I did was wrong."

"That doesn't make what they did right," Veronica said. "I'd do it again. Someone has to stand up to people like that or it keeps happening. I should know. I let it happen enough when I was with the Heathers. I don't want it to be my life anymore. And I have let this go for so long... I... I let them do this to me. I let them make me doubt my own mind and my sanity, and I let them. I let them ruin my life. I can't do that again. Not again."

He almost asked her if that meant she was going to drop the insane story, but he had a feeling what it really meant was that she was going to believe it no matter how twisted it ended up getting. He wasn't sure what lengths she'd go to if she decided to prove her theory about this other world that she thought Will and Barb were in.

"Can I just ask... will you... not do anything while I'm at work tonight?"

Veronica blinked. "What?"

"This theory you have, about the other world... you won't test it while I'm gone, will you?"

She frowned. "You're working?"

He sighed. "Look, I just... Mom isn't up to it, and we still have bills to pay. Bills that aren't going to go away because Will is missing. The car's been making funny noises for a while now. I need to fix it and I need money to do that. Plus... you know, my camera just got demolished and... I need to work."

She sighed, putting a hand to her head. "If we just had that damned money from my parents—"

"But we don't, so we have to make sure that we keep our heads above water while... I mean... We don't know how long Will is going to be missing or..." Jonathan couldn't bring himself to say it even though he was trying to be realistic and practical.

Veronica bit her lip. “We... We can keep looking. We don't know that Will is dead. Just because that thing took him doesn't mean that. When I was in the red area, I wasn't hurt. It was... different, but it wasn't dangerous. I just... I don't think I could have gotten out without him. Will and Barb... they might just be stuck.”

Jonathan sighed. He didn't know what to say about that. “I'm going to drop you off at the house, okay?”

“Forget it,” Veronica said, reaching for the door handle. “I'll walk.”

“Veronica, don't,” Jonathan said, almost slamming on the brakes. “Come on. That's crazy. We're driving. Don't—”

“You still think I'm psycho. Maybe more than you did before because I fought back, and I don't—just let me out here. I'd rather walk back than spend more time with people who think I'm nuts. I'm not crazy. I know what I saw. I know what happened, and I won't go denying it anymore. They can do all they want to me, but I won't let them take my mind again.”

He sighed. “Veronica, please. Just let me drop you off.”

“No,” she said. “Let me out here. I... I need to walk it off, and you shouldn't be late.”

“My shift doesn't start for—”

“Stop the fucking car, Jonathan.”

All that was left in the parking lot was a bit of glass and some torn photo paper. Nancy hadn't picked any more of it up, instead starting the trek to Steve's house. She wished, not for the first time, that she had a car of her own, but for all her parents had the money for one, they hadn't bought one for her. Barb's parents had given her the Rabbit for her sweet sixteen, and Nancy had been jealous ever since, but then again, having a friend like Barb meant she usually had a ride when she wanted one.

And Steve would have given her a ride if not for the game.

No. He wouldn't have. He wouldn't have thought this was necessary. It was just a prank, right? Barb and Veronica cooked up this revenge, with Jonathan's help, and it was just a terrible joke.

Except no one was laughing, and if Veronica's hateful words were true... Nancy would never forgive herself. She didn't want anything to happen to Barb. They'd been friends forever, and she couldn't imagine a world without Barb in it.

She didn't want to live in one.

Nancy walked up to Barb's car parked where she'd made her pull over the night before, her stomach twisting up with fear and sickness, knowing that Barb would never have left her car here even if she was pulling a prank. Barb was too responsible for that, and how would she have gotten anywhere? What, Jonathan's car? She wouldn't do that. It wasn't Barb.

Nancy looked over at Steve's house, her throat closing up as she struggled with what she was almost certain had to be true. Veronica wasn't lying. She hadn't made that up as a prank or anything of the sort. She had seen someone take Barb.

That couldn't be real, and yet it had to be.

Nancy forced herself forward, going up to the gate and letting herself into the backyard. The pool was how she remembered it from the night before, more or less, but it was still a bit different in the light. She looked around, trying to understand what could have happened.

She should have asked Veronica for more details. Something. Anything.

She needed to know more. She walked along towards the woods. If Barb had been taken, they'd had to have gone this way. Not into the house, but away from Veronica, away from where Jonathan had led her when he walked her out. Jonathan hadn't seen it, but Veronica had, and that meant here. Whoever it was must have gone this way.

"Barb?" Nancy called, taking a few steps forward. "Barb?"

She frowned. Hadn't Veronica said there were pictures of the car? So

if they had taken pictures of the car, then they'd come here today, hadn't they? She was just doing what they'd already done.

She should go back and talk to Veronica, get her to tell her exactly what happened.

“Barb?” she asked one more time, hoping she would find something they missed. “Barb, please, if you're anywhere—”

She heard a strange noise and whipped around, looking for the source of it. She saw something—someone—thin but almost gray, not wearing any clothes—without a face. She screamed, tripping over her own feet.

She scrambled up to her feet and ran.

Will looked around his house—what looked like his house in this creepy place—and swallowed, trying to understand how it had become filled with lights. Everywhere. He swore the place was now covered in Christmas lights. He didn't remember any when he hid to try and sleep again, feeling safer in what he believed was the daytime in this place over the night.

He wasn't sure about that, but he also didn't want to risk that thing coming back, and it mostly seemed to come around at night, so if he could get himself sleeping during the day and waking at night, he might keep himself safer.

He didn't know.

He looked around the living room, at all the lights, and he wished he could see them as they should be. The house must really be something. He was sure it was.

He stopped, thinking he heard the dog barking. He'd give anything to hug that mutt right now, wanting to be back home where it was warm. He didn't want to be alone again. He would give anything for the fire mage to show up again.

Anything.

He was getting pretty desperate.

“Will, are you here?”

His mom. He could hear her again, like before. She knew he was here. He nodded. He was here. He just... he had to find a way to show her that he was. He needed... the lights. Somewhere there was an end to them. If he walked from one end to the other, maybe?

He found some of the lights tangled together at the end of the string, and he picked them up, making them flash. “See it, Mom. Please see it.”

“Okay, good, good, good, good,” she said, and he almost cried with relief to know she'd seen it, that she had it on the other end. He could almost feel her, and it was the warmest he'd been in this place since the fire mage left.

“Are you—” She stopped. “Um, blink once for yes, twice for no. Can you do that for me, sweetie? Can you do—”

He made the lights blink just once, wishing she could hear his words the way he could hear hers.

“Oh, good boy. Good boy,” she told him, sounding so relieved. “Baby, I need to know—Are you alive?”

He blinked the lights once. He worried sometimes this was death, but he didn't think he was dead. Everything else was, though, everything but the demogorgon.

“Are you safe?”

He made it blink twice. This place wasn't safe. He needed to get out of here. He needed help.

“I need to know where to find you, honey,” his mom told him. “Where where are you? Can you... can you tell me where you are? Can you... Please, baby. I need to find you. Tell me what to do. Please.”

He looked down at the lights in his hands, feeling helpless. How

could he tell her with a blink? This place... it almost had to be seen to be believed.

Great. He was never going home.

"I don't know, Chief," Powell said, setting down the article and shaking his head. Clearly, he didn't see what Hop saw, but then again, few people would. Hop knew that much. The cop in him was paranoid and suspicious, and the only reason he didn't give in to that more often was that this was Hawkins, and nothing ever happened in Hawkins.

Not until now, at least.

"What don't you know?"

"This lady, Terry Ives, sounds like a real nut to me," Powell said, pointing to her picture. Her kid was taken for LSD mind control experiments? She's been discredited. Claim was thrown out—"

"Okay, forget about her," Hop said, though he hadn't completely discounted her, discredited or not. "Take a look at this. Dr. Martin Brenner."

"Who?" Powell asked, frowning at the second picture.

"Brenner. He runs Hawkins Lab."

Powell shrugged. "Okay."

"You don't find that interesting?" Hop asked, gesturing to the picture. Hawkins lab was run by this guy, and this guy had ties to some seriously weird shit back in the day.

"Not really," Powell answered. "He was involved in some hippie crap back in the day, so what?"

Hop shook his head. "No, this isn't hippie crap. This is CIA-sanctioned research."

And one other thing Hop had learned in Vietnam—don't trust the

damned CIA with anything. Those spec ops guys that went in pretending to be regular army, disappearing and pulling some seriously messed up shit—not that they were the only ones, that place seemed to want to take the soul of every man that went there—and men who asked too many questions about that sort of thing having a way of finding their way into the line of fire—not just the enemy's, either.

“Doesn't mean he had anything to do with our kid.”

“Come on,” Hop said, pointing back at the picture. “Look at that. Hospital gowns. All of 'em. Now, that piece of fabric that the teacher found by the pipe. That sure looked like a hospital gown to me, huh? Am I wrong?”

“I don't know, Chief.”

Hop was getting pretty damned frustrated. Why didn't anyone see it? This was right there. Right here. In front of them. “Come on, man. Work with me here. I'm not saying that there's some grand conspiracy. I'm just I'm saying maybe something happened. Maybe Will was in the wrong place at the wrong time and he saw something that he shouldn't have.”

Powell clearly didn't agree with that theory. “It's a reach.”

“It's a start,” Hop countered, and he had the feeling that if he could get through to Veronica, he might have a whole hell of a lot more than that. What if that was the fire, too? What if she saw something she shouldn't have? What if that was what the boyfriend was? What if he was some escapee from the lunatic asylum Brenner was running back in the day.

The radio on Powell's shoulder crackled to life. “Hey, Powell, is the chief with you?”

Hop reached over to grab the radio. “Hopper here. What do you got?”

“You're sure this is the way to go?” Mike asked, feeling like they were

headed somewhere very familiar. Not that most of Hawkins wasn't, but there were places for people to disappear, and Will must be in one of them. That was the only explanation he had.

"Yes," Eleven said, holding on tight behind him. He couldn't help feeling a bit weird about that. On the one hand, it was... nice. On the other, it was a girl. Touching him. He didn't really think that was ever going to happen, but El was different from other girls, and not just because her head was shaved and she had special powers.

"I don't know, guys. I think we should head back."

"Really, Dustin?" Lucas demanded. "Again?"

"What's so scary about here?" Mike had to ask. "We're not that far from Will's house, and there's nothing around for miles."

"Oh, yeah?" Dustin asked. "What's that, then?"

Mike frowned and looked over into the distance, seeing a small light flickering in the distance. Wait, he knew what that was. Didn't he?

"We should totally go."

"Not before we find Will," Mike insisted. "We came out here to find him, and we're going to find him. Whatever that is, it's not going to stop us."

"What if it jumps out and says boo?"

"That would be so stupid," Lucas said. "It's not going to happen. That's just—wait. That wasn't Dustin."

"Gee, it's so flattering to know I sound like a prepubescent boy with cleidocranial dysplasia," the girl said, stepping forward and almost making the others jump. "What are you doing out here?"

Damn. The Vampire. What was she doing out here? Didn't she only haunt the house?

"You know about the cleidocranial dysplasia?"

"I'm not deaf or stupid," Veronica said, taking a drag of her cigarette and blowing smoke into Dustin's face before turning to face Mike. "Or a vampire."

"Uh..." Mike thought she looked a lot like one, if vampires could smoke, and she'd come out of the shadows and scared all of them. "We were just looking for Will. What are you doing here?"

Veronica shrugged, finishing the cigarette and putting it out with her foot. "You're going the wrong way. Will is not at the house. It's been searched at least a dozen times by now, and Aunt Joyce is still there now. If Will came back, we'd know."

"Hiding," El said, and Mike flinched, wishing she hadn't drawn attention to herself.

Veronica frowned. "Since when is there a girl in your dork squad?"

"Since when do you talk to us?" Mike countered. "We don't have to explain ourselves to you. You were a freak staring at walls a few days ago."

Veronica rolled her eyes, taking out another cigarette and putting it in her mouth as she felt around her pockets for a lighter. "Never a pyro around when you need him."

Lucas frowned, looking at Mike. He shrugged. What did it matter what Veronica said? She was nuts. They already knew that. They just needed to leave and get back to looking for Will.

"We're going to go now."

"If you want, but I'd bet your comic collections you're not supposed to be out here," Veronica said. "You want to rethink answering me so I don't have to rethink informing your parents you're out here... with a girl, no less. I mean, I thought you were still in the cooties phase. Bit of a shame for all of you. High school is going to eat you poor nerds alive."

"Dude, she's scarier when she talks," Lucas said, and Dustin reached over to hit him. She just smiled, lighting up again.

She turned to Eleven. “Boys. I’m Veronica, by the way, since no one’s bothered to introduce us. They call me the vampire and think I’m insane.”

“Eleven,” she said before Mike could stop her. “I’m the weirdo.”

Veronica frowned. “You’re eleven?”

“Yeah, her age,” Mike said. “Always says that first. You know. It’s a thing.”

Veronica studied her. “I don’t suppose you know Nine, do you, Eleven?”

Eleven tensed up behind him, grabbing hold of Mike’s jacket. “There’s no nine. He... that was a lie. No nine.”

“No nine?” Dustin repeated. “Wait a minute. He? Are we talking—”

“If there’s an Eleven, who’s to say there’s not a One through Ten, too?” Lucas said. “Wait, you asked her about Nine. Specifically. You know a Nine?”

Veronica ignored them, going toward Eleven. “What can you do?”

“Nothing,” Mike snapped. “Leave her alone.”

“Can you find him? I think he can get to where Will is.”

“Will is lost somewhere in the woods,” Mike said. “That’s it. We’re just looking for him. El was helping. Another pair of eyes.”

“Mike,” Veronica said. “Two things: One, I have an IQ of one-twenty-five. I’m not an idiot. Don’t treat me like one because two—you’re a fucking terrible liar.”

“She’s kind of got a point,” Dustin said. “You are really bad at that.”

“Shut up.”

“It’s true.”

“Shut up.”

“Guys,” Lucas said, and then they all heard it. Sirens. They looked over at the road, where one police car drove past, followed by an ambulance, and then another police car.

“Will.”

Mike didn't believe that, couldn't, but he turned his bike and started pedaling toward the road, needing to know what they were doing. He had to know what this meant. He heard the other bikes near him, knowing Lucas and Dustin were by him.

He didn't know if Veronica had tried to follow them. He didn't need to know about her, though it was kind of weird that she seemed to know more about Eleven than she should, unless all of that was an act, which it had to be because she was just a freak who stared at the walls and talked to herself.

Unless... she was talking to Nine and he could like... be invisible or something.

Mike shook his head, pushing even harder as he got closer to the flashing lights. He dropped his bike as he got near the fire truck, hearing the chief's voice.

“Oh, Jesus. Oh, God. Please tell me it's not the kid.”

“It's not Will,” Mike said, leaning against the fire truck. “It... It can't be.”

“It's Will,” Lucas said watching them haul the body out of the water. It looked like it was wearing the same clothes Will had when he left Mike's house the other night, but this couldn't be happening. Will was alive. He had to be. Eleven said he was. “It's really Will.”

“Mike—”

“Mike?” he demanded, facing her when she spoke. “Mike, what? You were supposed to help us find him alive. You said he was alive. Why did you lie to us? What's wrong with you? What is wrong with you?”

“Mike,” she said, looking lost, but he just shook his head, picking up his bike again.

“Mike, come on. Don't do this, man.”

Mike ignored their voices as he pedaled away.

Veronica told herself she would never run again.

And when that damned money came in, she was getting a car. She might have been better off going into the house and stealing her aunt's keys, taking her car, but if this was what it looked like, Joyce couldn't see that.

Veronica didn't know that she could handle it, for all that she'd insisted on taking back her own life and fought with Jonathan about it. She wanted to be doing something, but there wasn't much she could do on her own.

What she really needed was her pyro. If she could just talk to him, that would be a big help, but she was almost sure he could find Will. He could get to wherever it was that thing had taken Will and Barb. He could help her save them.

Jonathan thought she was nuts, but she wasn't crazy.

She'd seen a girl with a shaved head who went by a number, and she was almost certain that girl was an experiment, too.

And the boys were in so much danger, they had no idea. They could all end up dead. This was bad. So bad.

She followed the road down, seeing the lights when she got closer, and she felt sick as she neared the flashing lights. She saw Mike ride past her, and he looked upset. Eleven wasn't with him, and that couldn't be good, either.

Veronica forced herself to run the rest of the way to the other boys and Eleven, seeing tears on their faces and confusion on hers.

“What is it?”

“Will,” Dustin choked out. “They... in the water... Will.”

Veronica went around the fire truck and backed up as she saw the man near the water. He'd been with the blonde. She backed up and went to the girl. "Go. Now. They're here."

"What are you talking about?" Lucas demanded. "It's the police. Of course they're here. Will's dead. Don't you get that? He's dead."

Veronica ignored him, taking Eleven's arm and leading her away from the others. The boys were too upset to argue with her. She was too numb to think about Will really being dead. That wasn't real yet. She couldn't let it be, not yet. She'd fall apart if she did.

She stopped when they were hopefully far out of sight and earshot of the others. "You're from the lab, aren't you? That mark on your wrist says eleven like his says nine. It's the only name you've ever known."

The girl's eyes widened in a panic. She tried to pull away, but Veronica held onto her. "Listen to me. You have put all those boys in danger. They will kill every one of your friends if they find out you're with them."

"No."

"I've seen that one before, and I know he works with them. With the blonde woman. The agent. She's one of them. She's not here, but he is. They killed my parents. Burned down my house. Don't let them do that to your friends."

Eleven swallowed, looking like she was going to panic. "Mike."

"I saw him leaving."

"Dude, why are you scaring the weirdo?" Lucas demanded, coming up to him. "Come on, El. We need to get you back to Mike's for the night."

She nodded, climbing on the back of the bike. Veronica let them go, pulling her sweater around herself and trembling. She swallowed and turned back to the lights. Hopper was there. He looked gutted.

She bit her lip, fighting tears. That couldn't be Will. It wasn't too late. If she could just find her pyro, she'd find Will, and that wasn't him.

She didn't believe that. Why would that thing take him only to leave him in the water like this?

"Veronica," Hopper said. "What are you doing here?"

"Will's friends... they... bikes... down here... I..." Veronica said, hating how the words came out all wrong. She was better than this.

"Damn it," he said. "Come on. I'll take you home."

"It can't be him," Veronica said. "I finally figured out how to help him... it can't be him. He... if he's here, where's Barb?"

Hopper frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"That thing. The one I saw that took Will... it took Barb... That's not Will. It can't be. She's not here. He's alive. We can still find him. We just need... I need to find him."

Hopper pulled her into his arms. "He's gone. He's gone, and you have to accept that. This isn't your fault, Veronica. It's no one's fault."

She shuddered. "You don't understand. No one does."

24. Chapter 24

Summary for the Chapter:

Will's body has been found, and people have to be informed.

Notes for the Chapter:

I've never actually played the pen and paper RPG version of Dungeons and Dragons, I admit that. I've played several D&D based video games, and I was once a terrible DM myself, for a Star Wars RPG with my friends, but that's the extent of my knowledge there, and so I had to look up all the stuff on the demogorgon and it is possible it's wrong, but I thought it was kind of neat to have Will geek out over it.

Also... that scene after telling Joyce where Hop goes out to his car, starts it and then shuts it off because he can't leave... it's a beautiful one, but I couldn't see it happening this time around. *sigh*

October 8

This place was so fucking depressing.

Veronica hated it here. Her aunt tried, and she was so nice, but it wasn't home. It wasn't even close. Her parents were gone, and that was her fault, and she was stuck here in a bare room with strangers. The people she loved the most were dead.

Her friends hadn't called. Her friends, if she even dared called the Heathers that, probably didn't even know where she was. They didn't care.

She knew she didn't deserve for them to care, not someone like Betty. A part of her wished she'd befriended Martha Dunnstock instead of tormenting her, since maybe that would have changed everything for the better. She didn't know. All she knew was she'd thrown away what she did have to be popular, and in the end, it left her with nothing.

Heather Chandler wasn't here to ruin her life, so maybe that was something, and maybe people might have pitied her if she'd stuck around Sherwood. Maybe her life wouldn't have been as over as Chandler claimed. Maybe she could have survived a few more months.

Only her aunt lived here, and it wasn't like they could have moved into her old house. It was gone. So there was nothing there, only here in Hawkins, and what they did have... Veronica could tell it wasn't enough. She was just making things here worse for everyone.

Will actually said it. The others tried to cover over with smiles and promises of things getting better, but as far as Veronica could see, that was not going to happen. They couldn't afford her, and she knew it.

She needed to do something about it, and a part of her thought maybe she should just go. She needed to leave. She should just... go. They didn't want her here, not really, and she didn't even want to be here. She wanted to be where she belonged, though a part of her thought where she belonged was in the ground beside her parents.

This was all her fault.

She looked out at the yard again, wishing she could see something, anything, that would make it seem less depressing. She didn't find it. The yard was the same, barely maintained, like the house, since it was Jonathan who got stuck with all that, Jonathan who had no time between taking care of the rest of them and school. Veronica wasn't sure when he slept.

She didn't. Not without her drugs, and she wouldn't take them again. She would lay there in that bed and just stare at the walls until her eyes shut of their own accord, but when she looked around again,

only minutes had passed.

Her days were so long. Too long. She hated them.

She was starting to think she wanted to go back to school just to have something to do. The classwork would suck, and there might even be a chance she'd be doing stuff she'd already done before, but even that was better than the empty walls of her room, wasn't it?

She should go. She should find somewhere else to stay, a place to live that didn't hurt everyone around her. Will could have his room back, Jonathan would be less tired, and maybe Joyce, too, could get a break.

Veronica sighed, lowering her head. "Why didn't I get to go with you?"

"Is she talking to herself?" Will asked, and Jonathan pushed him away from Veronica's doorway. He knew his brother was going to drop him off at Mike's before he went to work, and he wasn't even sure why he'd stopped to listen to his cousin, because she just muttered to herself a lot. She was psycho, and he knew it.

It wasn't just the drugs now, since she wasn't taking them. She barely said two words to them, but get her alone in her room and she'd ramble on for hours like someone was outside her window listening to her.

Sometimes the dog barked like there was, but Will checked the yard and there wasn't anyone there. He knew she was just nuts.

Veronica the Vampire, though the name didn't entirely fit. She could go out in the daytime, and sunlight didn't burn her, but she still wore black a lot and the muttering to herself was so creepy there was something wrong with her.

His mom said give Veronica time. Will didn't want to give her time. He wanted her to go away.

"Come on. I'm going to be late for work," Jonathan said as he guided him toward the car.

Will grimaced, hating how Jonathan worked almost as much as their mom did. He didn't think that was right. "Doesn't it bother you? You have to work but she just sits there in her room."

"She just lost her parents a week ago," Jonathan reminded him, opening the door for Will, who rolled his eyes as he sat down. He did not need someone to do that for him, but he sat down anyway. "What would you do if you lost Mom?"

Will swallowed. The idea of losing his mom, even if she was almost always gone at work, was impossible to wrap his head around. His mom was... his mom. They were... they needed each other. He needed her, and he needed Jonathan, and he'd be lost without either of them, even if he had his friends. It wasn't like he could count on Veronica for anything, now could he?

"Just... be patient, Will," Jonathan said as he got behind the wheel. "We'd both be a mess if we'd lost Mom. Not so much if something happened to Lonnie, but Mom? Veronica lost both her parents. She's upset. She's hurting. I could get angry about her not helping, but what good would that do? I don't need more reasons to be angry. I just... I'm doing what I need to, and that's what matters."

Will nodded, buckling his seat belt. He didn't know how Jonathan did it. He wouldn't be able to stand it. Not him.

"You doing a campaign this weekend?" Jonathan asked as he backed the car out of the driveway.

"I think so. Mike got a new addition to the set. New monsters, so we should get a new one. He hasn't said anything, though, so he probably wants it to be a surprise."

"Should be fun."

Will shrugged. "You know you don't have to do this for me, pretend that things are better than they are. I know they're not."

"I'm asking about your game, Will," his brother said. "Believe me, I'm not trying to fool anyone. I know things are bad. Just... tell me about these new monsters. Anything interesting in them?"

"I think this set was supposed to include a Demogorgon."

"What?"

Will smiled. "He's been in the game for a long time, almost since, you know, it started, but they changed the rules so you didn't need the miniatures for resolving combat, so at first his parents didn't want to buy any of them, but they're nice for placement, you know? So we know what's going on? And so we never had a figure of him before, but now we do."

"You didn't say what he did."

"He's a Prince of Demons, the Lord of All That Swims in Darkness. No one's ever been able to defeat him, though one time, someone cut his head in two so he has two heads."

"Two heads?"

"Yeah, and two personalities," Will said, getting another look from his brother. "He's super powerful, that's why he's got all those titles. He can charm his enemies or drive them insane with a look, depending on which head they see."

"And what happens if you see both?"

"If you do, you're screwed. He can hypnotize you. And even if he doesn't... he's got this tail, it's like a whip, and it can drain the life energy right out of a living foe. He has these tentacles that can make you rot away and die. And he can move two times per turn, 'cause, you know. Two heads."

"Right. And... you can actually defeat this thing?"

"Um..." Will thought about their party and skills. "Maybe?"

"You don't sound very confident, Will the Wise."

"Well, a fireball might work."

"Might?"

“Okay, so it would be very, very hard to kill him, but we'd try. We'd have to.”

November 9

“Come on,” Hop said, opening the door for Veronica. “We're home.”

She got out of the truck, looking at the house. She shuddered, and he put a hand on her back, guiding her up towards the porch where Jonathan and Joyce were sitting despite the hour and how cold it was. He frowned, still moving them both forward.

“Joyce,” he began, not sure how he was going to do this. He had to tell her he'd failed, that her boy was gone, and he didn't know how. He'd lived this nightmare, and he wouldn't wish it on anyone, but certainly not Joyce. She deserved better, always had, not this life that had beaten her down and kept trying to take the spirit right out of her, that smile that had always gotten him in the past, the one that had gotten both of them in trouble.

“There you are,” Jonathan said, going over to Veronica's side. “I was worried. Look, I'm sorry about earlier. I just... I was afraid if you went off alone, you'd... you'd get hurt, and then you weren't home and Mom was freaked and—”

“Jonathan,” Veronica said, her eyes welling up with tears. “They found something. In the quarry.”

He tensed. “No. Not Will.”

Veronica bit her lip. “It... I don't want to believe it. I figured it out. I know how to—knew how to get him back, but... I... It's too late.”

“What are you talking about?” Joyce asked, frowning. “No. You... this...”

“Let's go inside,” Hop said. “You shouldn't be out here. It's freezing.”

“It was in the house, Hop,” Joyce said, looking over at Veronica.

“That thing, the thing without a face. It was here. I saw it. It tried to come through the wall.”

Veronica whimpered. “If it only takes someone when it—but it took Barb—and it left Will's body... why is it doing this? It doesn't make sense. I thought... I don't... if Will was...”

Jonathan led her inside by the arm. “You don't know that it would have worked, that theory of yours. We... that man might have killed Will and taken Barb and... I don't know. It doesn't make sense, you're right, but that's probably because there's another explanation for all of this, not what we think it is. Right, Hopper?”

Hop swallowed, taking Joyce over to sit her down on the couch. She eyed the wall and trembled. He almost wanted to hold her, but he couldn't do that now. He had to be official, had to give her the bad news.

“A trooper found something in the, uh, water that's at the quarry. Our working theory right now is that Will crashed his bike, he made his way over the quarry and, uh, accidentally fell in. The earth must have given way,” Hop told her, watching her face. “Joyce? Joyce? Do you understand what I'm saying?”

Joyce shook her head. “No. Whoever you found is not my boy. It's not Will.”

“Joyce—”

“No, you don't understand,” she said, shaking. She rose and went to the cabinet, picking up a tangle of Christmas lights. “I... I talked to him... half hour ago. He was... He was here. He was... He was talking with these.”

“Talking?” Hop asked, frowning. He wanted to help Joyce, he really did, but this was nuts. Lights did not talk.

“Uh-huh. One blink for yes, two for no,” Joyce said. Then she pointed to the alphabet on the wall with the lights. “And... And then I made this so he could talk to me. 'Cause he was hiding from that... that thing.”

"The thing that came out of the wall?" Hop asked, glad neither Powell or Callahan was here to hear this. They'd want to lock Joyce up for sure. "The thing that chased you?"

"Yeah." Joyce looked over at Veronica. "I saw it. I saw what you saw, the thing that took Will."

"Mom, come on, please," Jonathan said, "you've gotta stop this. Even if you saw it... that's not... Will is not in the lights."

"No, maybe he's—It's after him," Joyce insisted. "He's in danger. We have to find him! We—"

"What exactly was this thing? It was some kind of... animal, maybe? Something that could have dragged Will to the quarry?"

"If it was an animal, why didn't it just eat him?" Veronica asked, and Hop looked over at her. Damn it, the girl was not helping. "It wouldn't just leave him in the water. It... An animal doesn't kill just to kill. That's what humans do, not animals."

"It was almost human," Joyce said, "but it wasn't. It... It had these long arms and it didn't have a face."

"It didn't have a face?" Hop repeated. "Joyce, I know that's what Veronica saw the other night, and I'm worried you saw that again because... you wanted to see it. You wanted to believe there was something there that took him—"

"It didn't have a face," she insisted. "And he was here. I know he was."

"Joyce, listen to me. Listen to me," Hop almost begged, touching her arms. "After Sara, I saw her, too. And I heard her. I didn't know what was real. And then I figured out that it was in my mind. And I had to pack all that away. Otherwise, I was gonna fall down a hole that I couldn't get out of."

Joyce shook her head. "No, you're... you're talking about grief. This is different."

"I'm just saying that you—"

"No, I know what you're saying, Hop," Joyce insisted. "I swear to you, I know what I saw. And I'm not crazy. Veronica is not crazy."

"I'm not saying that you're crazy. That either of you are crazy."

"No, you are," Joyce said, calling him on it. "And I understand, but God, I I need you to believe me. Please. Please."

He wanted to, but this was all so insane. They had a body. Will was dead, and he could not be in the lights, no matter what Joyce thought. "Listen, I think you should go to the morgue tomorrow and see him for yourself. It'll give you the answers that you need. But tonight—"

"Oh, God."

"I want you to try to get some sleep, if you can," Hop told her. "Please."

Jonathan looked at her, and Hop got the feeling Joyce hadn't slept since this started. Damn it. That was probably the answer to most of this. That many hours, worked up and without sleep, she was probably seeing all sorts of weird shit.

"What about Barb?" Veronica asked, and he looked over at her. "You are going to at least talk to her parents, right? That thing... it took her, and I... I saw that, too. And I know you think I'm insane, but if... if it just dumped Will's body... then Barb at least could still be alive. There's still a chance she could be saved."

Hop frowned. "You'd better start at the beginning. Tell me everything."

Joyce watched her niece light up a cigarette, too numb to move for one of her own. They kept telling her that her son was dead, and she could not, did not believe that. She refused. Will was alive. He'd spoken to her, and if Barb was missing, too, then... then Will wasn't dead.

Or at least... Veronica had more answers than she'd said before, and Joyce needed to know what those were, what was going on.

Jonathan knew. She could tell he knew. They'd both kept this from her, whatever it was.

“Steve Harrington had a party last night,” Veronica said as she paced along the room. “Not a big one, not one anyone would pay much attention to—just him, Tommy, Carol, and Nancy. Or at least, that was what they wanted. Nancy wouldn't go without Barb, and Barb... she'd picked me up to take me to that vigil for Will, so... I was in the car with them... and when Nancy was still trying to deny that all the party was... it was just an excuse to get into her pants, and we all knew it except Nancy... but Barb was worried, so she went after Nancy, and I followed because I wasn't going to sit in the car all night, either.”

“Okay,” Hop said. “So you were at this party. What happened? Did he... force himself on her, then? Is that what—”

“No,' if that had happened, it was... you know, consensual,” Veronica said, looking over at Jonathan, who winced. “Um... they were drinking. A lot. Steve had a bunch of beers and was already through a couple when we got there. Tommy and Carol were about the same. He threatened to throw her in the pool.”

“She screamed,” Jonathan said. “I heard it when I was out taking pictures of where Will's bike was found. And... I followed it only to see that it was a party. When I saw Nancy and Veronica were there... I sort of... stayed.”

“What Jonathan is trying not to say is that he was a bit of a stalker himself and took pictures of all of us without us knowing,” Veronica said, and he looked at her. “Hey, I am not covering for you. We all know what you did was wrong, and it's not like they're not going to find out what I did to that Tommy kid when Steve broke your camera.”

“He broke your camera?” Joyce asked, wincing. She knew how expensive that was. Jonathan would have saved for months for it. “Wait, what did you do to Tommy?”

“She kicked him in the balls when he stopped her from going after Steve,” Jonathan answered with a slight smile. “She was... pretty

fierce. Not someone you wanted to mess with.”

“That seems familiar,” Hop said, looking at Joyce, and she felt her cheeks heat up for a moment. Maybe he didn't think she was all crazy. “We'll go back to the camera and the fight in a minute. First, let's finish the party. What exactly happened?”

“Steve was showing off with that lame ass trick where you poke a hole in a beer can and drink it from the bottom,” Veronica said. “So Nancy tried it to prove him wrong, and I did it because they thought it was some great feat that she did it, but it wasn't. None of them believed I would, and I mouthed off to Carol afterward, blew smoke in her face. That was the best part of the night, I think.”

“It was pretty good,” Jonathan agreed. “I didn't think you could do that, and standing up to Carol... no one does that.”

“Barb wanted a picture,” Veronica said. “She said... she wished she could have one of Carol's face. But... that was later, after she cut her finger. I... After I was stupid, Nancy pushed her to try it, and Barb finally caved, but she cut her finger making the hole, and we went inside to bandage it up.”

“When they were gone, Tommy threw Carol into the pool and jumped in. Steve did the same to Nancy and then joined them,” Jonathan said. “There was some kissing, and eventually, they all got out and went inside.”

“Barb and I met up with Nancy as she was going upstairs,” Veronica said. “Nancy told Barb to go home. And Barb... she was pretty hurt. She said it wasn't like Nancy, insisted on staying to make sure Nancy got home safe. I had no choice but to stay, too, though I tried to talk her out of it. She was sitting on the diving board, dipping her feet in the water, and then the lights flickered... and I saw that thing...a and then Barb was gone. I screamed, and Jonathan came... but everyone said I was upset and drinking and that Barb and I were just jealous and we made it up to come between Nancy and Steve... which is fucking stupid because I don't care who she sleeps with, just that she was hurting Barb... Well, she's hurting Jonathan, too, but she doesn't really seem to see it, unlike the rest of the world.”

"Veronica," Jonathan said, but she just shrugged.

"So this thing... it just took Barb and it disappeared?"

Veronica nodded. "It... I think there's somewhere it can go, a place where we can't see it."

Hop sighed. "You know that—"

"Sounds crazy. I know. Jonathan didn't believe me. No one does. But Barb's car was still there when we went there in the morning. We didn't see any tracks or any sign of Barb. Jonathan took pictures. Though... Carol's friend Nicole waltzed right into the darkroom as Jonathan was developing them, and she saw the ones from the party... and she told Steve and the others, which is how the camera ended up broken. They were waiting at the car when we got there, and Steve tore up the photos."

"I need to develop them again," Jonathan said. "I can, but I didn't want to bother going into the school again afterward. I was taking Veronica home, we argued, and she got out. I went to work. When I got home, that's when Mom was running down the driveway freaked out because that thing was here."

"All right," Hop said. "I've got to go talk to Barb's parents. In the morning, you can take a look at Will's body and see for yourselves."

Joyce swallowed. "Veronica, you said that you thought this thing—"

"Forget it. I'm crazy. I'm going to bed," she said, and Joyce frowned, wanting her to come back. She needed to know what that was, where her son was. It made sense, didn't it? Will had said he was here, right here, and yet she couldn't see him.

"Veronica—"

"Joyce, let her go," Hop said. "She's been through enough. All of you have. I just... I want you to promise me that you'll get some rest."

Joyce didn't know how she was going to sleep, but she nodded. She could always ask Veronica in the morning.

Eleven held the radio in her hands, thinking. She knew that Lucas had not wanted to bring her here, not wanted to bring her anywhere. They were all angry with her for not finding Will, but they didn't understand. Will was at his house, he was hiding. He was in the other place, but he was in his house.

And that girl, the one they called a vampire and seemed scared of, she'd spoken to her. She'd said... she'd said a lot of things, things that confused Eleven. She said she knew Nine, but Papa had said there was no one else. Only Eleven.

But Eleven remembered that night in the rain, when Mike first found her. Not long before the boys had flashed their lights into her face, someone had called out to her.

He'd known she was Eleven. He'd claimed to be Nine. He'd said he could take her somewhere safe. He'd said he could help her. She'd gone with Mike and the others, and she was glad she had, but what if she'd gone with Nine?

The girl knew about the tattoo. Where it was. What it said. What it meant. Nine was like her, like her enough that the dark haired girl had known to ask about her powers.

And she'd said they'd hurt Eleven's friends. Hurt Mike.

"Can you please stop that?" Mike demanded, going through papers, and she didn't look at him, her eyes on the radio. "Are you deaf?"

She looked up, staring at him.

"I thought we were friends, you know?" he said, still angry, "but friends tell each other the truth. And they definitely don't lie to each other. You made me think Will was okay, that he was still out there, but he wasn't. He wasn't! Maybe you thought you were helping, but you weren't. You hurt me. Do you understand? What you did sucks. Lucas was right about you. All along."

That hurt in a way that Eleven hadn't really known pain before, aside from Papa's disappointment. She wasn't lying. She knew where Will was, but she couldn't show them what she knew. She'd tried taking

them there, but they didn't understand.

And maybe she shouldn't have shown them anything, because the bad men... they could hurt them, all of them, kill them.

Only she wasn't lying, and Mike had to know that. She had to show that.

The radio crackled. *"So come on and let me know... Should I stay or should I go? Should I stay or should I go now? Should I stay or should I go now? If I go there will be trouble... If I stay it will be double..."*

Mike came over, and she handed him the radio.

"Will, is that you? It's Mike! Do you copy? Over," he said, waiting for a response. "Will, are you there? Will! Was that... Was it..."

"Will."

"Mrs. Holland?" Hop asked, trying to force something close to a kind expression. Not a smile, that would have been wrong, but something sympathetic. "I'm sorry. I know it's late, but I got a report about your daughter, and I would like to speak to you."

"It's not too late to talk about Barb," she said, letting him into the house. "It'll never be too late to talk about her."

Her voice broke a bit on the last part, and he grimaced, feeling another kick to the gut. He couldn't talk about Sara most days. Didn't want to.

"Come on," her husband said, leading her back to the couch. "We don't know much. Nancy and Karen Wheeler called us this afternoon, told us... something happened. I didn't know what to think."

"Barb, she told us she was going to the vigil for Will Byers and then staying the night at Nancy's," Mrs. Holland explained. "We've known the Wheelers forever. Nancy and Barb are such good friends. We never thought... we didn't know to worry."

Hop nodded. He wouldn't have thought there was much reason to in

Hawkins, not before all this started. "I've been told they lied about where they were going and were at a party last night at Steve Harrington's house."

The Hollands nodded. "Nancy told us that, too. She said... she said she told Barb to leave and thought she had gone home until this morning when she didn't come to school."

Well, that was a lie, but then again, he wasn't sure he would have admitted to what Veronica said, either. Especially not about doing nothing about it. He took a breath. "I'm afraid what I have to tell you is not good news."

"You found her? Is she...?"

He shook his head. "We didn't find your daughter. Not yet. We found Will Byers."

"Oh, God," Mrs. Holland said. "He's dead, isn't he? That poor boy. His friend Mike, Nancy's brother, he came home real upset, but Karen didn't explain, and we felt we'd rather be home in case Barbara came or called."

Hop nodded. "That was probably the right call. I just... I spoke to Veronica Sawyer tonight. She was also there at the party. She said she and Barb stayed to wait for Nancy, but someone took Barb."

"What?" Mrs. Holland squeaked out the word, and her husband took her hand, pulling her into his arms to hold her.

"Veronica has... she was pretty traumatized by her parents' death, and I don't know if you've heard the rumors—"

"They said she was crazy, but we didn't see any sign of that when she stayed over here," Mr. Holland said. "She was polite, teared up a bit during dinner, which Barb explained was because of the oregano and her mom making the sort of meal. She was quiet, but other than the crying... we didn't think anything was wrong with her."

Hop nodded. "Well, no one listened to her last night because this thing—person—that she saw didn't have a face."

The Hollands frowned. "What, like a mask?"

Or a monster from Joyce's imagination, but he'd go with mask for the sake of this. "Yeah, that's what we're thinking. Look, I know this is the last thing you'd want to be thinking about, but... is there anyone you can think of that might have had a grudge against your daughter? Anyone who could have hurt her?"

"No. Not Barbara. She's so kind and sweet... No one would hurt her."

Hop nodded. He'd figured as much. The closest thing he had to a suspect again was Veronica's boyfriend, and she'd said something about knowing how to get Will and Barbara back, but he wasn't sure she was all that lucid, and if it was as simple as trading herself for Will, he wanted to believe she would have already done that.

"In the morning, we're going to start doing the same kind of searches for Barb as we did for Will, and I'll be speaking to Nancy and the other kids at that party. I swear, I will find out what happened to your daughter."

"Thank you," Mrs. Holland said, and he tried to give her a reassuring smile, but he had no damned clue how he was going to what he just promised, and worse, he was almost certain that girl was just as dead as Will Byers.

Hop needed a drink. Badly.

25. Chapter 25

Summary for the Chapter:

Plans get made.

Will's family tries to deal with the discovery of his body.

Notes for the Chapter:

I thought about not doing this, but I realized that it wasn't an idle threat, and I went ahead with it. I feel terrible, though.

October 9

“You're sure about this?” Joyce asked, setting her coffee down and giving her niece a good, hard look. She wouldn't have expected Veronica to ask her about starting school tomorrow, and she wasn't sure she herself was ready for that, even if she'd brought it up a few times since it had been forced to her attention. “You really want to do school?”

Veronica looked at her hands. “Just... don't want to be here or at the store all day.”

“Oh.” That made plenty of sense, actually, and Joyce couldn't blame her one bit for wanting something to change up the long monotony of her days. She felt that way herself most of the time, especially if the store got slow. “Sure. I'll talk to the school. I'm not sure if they'll want placement tests or just your old records. That might take a bit. Are you okay with waiting? I probably can't start that until tomorrow unless I run into Miss Nosy again.”

Veronica shrugged. “Whatever.”

"I'll check into it, I promise," Joyce told her. She didn't really want to talk to anyone at the school, but she could do it for Veronica's sake. Maybe the new routine would be good for her. Maybe she'd like it much more than it would seem. A bit of normalcy couldn't hurt.

And maybe it was a sign that Veronica was starting to accept what had happened and how her life had changed. Not that it was all such a good thing, but Veronica was going to be living here for a while. She needed to start having a place in Hawkins, not just an empty room and borrowed clothes, but a bit of her own life. School wasn't the best example of that, but it was something.

She picked up her coffee and stopped. "Where did I put my keys?"

Veronica shrugged.

Joyce took another sip of her coffee, swallowing it down before calling out, "Jonathan?"

"Check the couch," he called back from his bedroom. She sighed, knowing he told her that every morning, every time she lost her keys, and he was almost always right. Sometimes, when he handed them to her, she swore he'd already gotten them from there, no matter how many times she went over the night before and could not, for the life of her, remember sitting down on the couch, even for a second.

"Okay," she said, setting her coffee down again. "Are you sure you don't want to come to the store with me today?"

Veronica nodded. "I'm sure."

"Jonathan's working again and Will won't be back from the Wheeler's until late. You will be all alone."

Veronica shrugged again. "I'm fine."

Joyce knew that wasn't true, but she gave the girl a smile and an encouraging squeeze of her shoulder before she went over to check the couch for her keys. She flipped up a cushion, snatching her keys from under it. She didn't want to tell Jonathan he was right, but he'd know anyway. She gave her niece another glance before heading out, knowing she was going to be late if she didn't go now.

He'd made it back to the cabin first.

He was sore and tired and feeling just as bad as he usually did after a big fire and a firewalk. He didn't feel good, and he'd ended up sleeping until it was dark again. The couch was musty and not that comfortable, but he preferred it to the floor, if only just. He hadn't looked around enough to see if it had a bed before, since he barely had the energy to lie down on the damned couch when he got back.

He'd eaten a bit of food and smoked a cigarette, aware of the sensation that he could actually access a firewalk with only that small a flame, but he'd already figured out that something was different about Hawkins.

He knew what it was.

The lab. It had to be. No other explanation made sense. Maybe there was something here, something in the area, but even if Hawkins itself was a little different, it wasn't *that* different, not without the lab.

Veronica had mentioned that statistic about people only using part of their brains, which implied that everyone had potential to do so much more than what they thought, but even if they did, most of them didn't have it trained—forced—to happen, not like him or Eleven, and that was all the lab.

So he knew that whatever was different about Hawkins, the lab was pushing it to more, like he had been pushed into being more, into becoming fire. He grew stronger with practice, too, and he knew that, but it was here, in Hawkins, that it felt easier than it had anywhere else.

He would test the cigarette thing later. He wasn't ready to go anywhere just yet.

He wanted to see Veronica, and he'd seen the others leave enough to know that they were likely gone during the day, even if it was easier to come and go in the dark.

He needed to find a way to get close enough to really talk to her. He

hadn't dared the other day, since he knew that the lab listened to all of the town, and if they had let Veronica go, they had to be watching her. He hadn't seen anyone at the actual house, but then from what he could tell, it should have gotten anyone who tried noticed.

The lab was careful. The dog would have been seen as a risk, though he wouldn't be surprised if it had been tranquilized at least once to do stuff.

Still, he knew that they had to be listening. He wasn't stupid enough to think they wouldn't be. Veronica should be dead, not relatively free, and if she was free... it was a trap. They had to be waiting for him to show himself. If they hadn't seen him already, they didn't have cameras, but they had sound.

So he couldn't talk to her in the house.

Maybe in the yard. Just maybe. That might be safe. He wished his abilities came with something that could allow him to find those things, listening devices, but he couldn't. He could make fire, control it and end it, and he could walk through it to somewhere else and come out where he wanted—mostly—but he couldn't find electronics and keep Veronica safe.

He could burn the electronics, but it would take Veronica's home again, and he couldn't do that.

He light another cigarette. If this could start a firewalk, then he could, in theory, get her out of there without anyone noticing.

It was definitely worth testing.

November 10

Joyce had paced the house restlessly all night. She'd almost gone in and demanded answers from Veronica last night, only barely talked herself out of it. She'd stopped at Jonathan's door more than once, wanting to comfort him but lacking words when she couldn't accept that Will was dead.

She couldn't tell Jonathan it would be all right, that they would make it through just the two of them, because she wasn't going to allow that. Will was still out there, and she was going to find him and bring him home.

She wanted to ask Veronica about how, and she had a feeling it was something to do with the seemingly crazy story the girl had told her about her boyfriend and how her parents had died. Joyce couldn't discount it. As insane as it was, she was listening to lights, and she knew it was Will talking to her. She knew it.

She wanted to ask him to talk again, but a part of her was afraid, and if Will was hiding from that thing—he had to be, it was in the house, it had come for her—then he wouldn't be able to answer. It wouldn't be the answer everyone would assume it was if she couldn't get him to answer her now.

She was also afraid of that thing coming back, and she didn't know how either of the kids could sleep after knowing it had been in the house. Jonathan maybe he didn't believe, but he'd also lost his brother.

And Veronica... she'd had that thing take Will right in front of her.

Joyce shook her head, marching out to the shed and getting an axe. She brought it back inside with her, sitting down and holding onto it. If that monster came back, she'd be ready.

She sat, and she waited, and eventually her eyes started to droop. She thought she saw Will standing in front of her in the sunlight, and he called to her, saying Mom, but when she went to answer, he became Jonathan and she jerked awake, not sure how long it had been since she fell asleep.

If that was even sleeping.

“Mom,” Jonathan said. “Wake up.”

She grimaced. “What what time is it?”

“It's almost eight,” he said. “We have to go.”

She frowned. "Go? Where?"

"To see Will."

Joyce shook her head. She didn't want to do that. Whatever that thing was, whoever that boy was, it wasn't her Will. Will was still alive. She knew it.

"I already talked to Veronica," Jonathan said. "She says she's seen it and she's not going, but Mom, you need to go."

"No."

"Aunt Joyce," Veronica said from the hallway. "Please. Only you'd really know if it was him or not. You have to."

Joyce sighed, but she couldn't argue with that. "I... Okay. I'll go."

He woke, aching, and let out a groan that echoed a bit as he struggled to force himself up. He laid back down and decided he wasn't moving for a bit, if ever again. His body seemed to favor that last option, though wherever he was, he knew he couldn't stay here.

"You're alive. Awake. I mean, I knew you were alive, because I could see you were still breathing, but you were starting to scare me because you didn't wake up and didn't wake up and... you were so still and pale and hours had gone by and I thought for sure if I left the room again or something, I'd come back to find you dead."

He forced an eye open and took in the redhead. Oh. Her. He'd saved her back in the other place, and she was still here. Odd. "Not dead."

She rolled her eyes. "I know that. I just... I had hours to wait, watching over you. I even was able to get the shower going and wash myself and my clothes while you were out. They're dry, by the way. That's how long you've been unconscious. I think it was over a day, but I'm not sure of time after being in that place."

He nodded. That other place threw off his sense of time as well as a lot of other things in his body. "Your stuff... dried. Why... my shirt?"

"I said they dried, not that they didn't still smell, and I actually wasn't sure this was your shirt. It seemed... well, a bit big for you, even if you're a guy."

He liked his clothes a bit on the larger side, nothing too tight. He'd lived most of his life in nothing but a hospital gown, so tight stuff just felt... odd. Wrong. And while Bud had given him several tank tops, he didn't like the looks he got when he wore them without a trench coat.

"So... this is your place?"

He shook his head. "Found it. Use it. Not sure whose it is."

She nodded. "Okay. Well, I... I still don't know exactly where we are or how to get home, not that I could have left you here or anything, not when you were dying—"

"Not dying. Just... tired. Hungry."

"I found a few things around here that might pass for food, but I'm not sure you want to eat it as I have no idea how long it's been here," she said. "Though I guess you brought some of it here."

"Chips mine. Safe."

"I take it by the short, clipped sentences, you're doing bad again, not that I didn't know that already from how long you slept," she said, going across the room. "Are you going to be okay?"

He nodded. "Just... hurts a lot to do... that... in that place... and... to bring someone... else... along."

"But it won't kill you?"

He frowned at her, forcing himself up to face her as she stood back in front of him with a bag of chips in hand. "You... care? I... I scare you. I don't... I don't understand."

"It does worry me what you can do and that you've killed people, but you saved my life and Veronica cares about you, so... I don't think I want you dead," Barb said. "I just... you can do frightening things, and when you were telling me you'd killed and that people will kill

me for knowing that you exist—”

“Both true,” he said, taking the bag of chips and opening it, starting to eat. Food would help. He needed energy.

“So, even though we're back in our world—we are back in our world, right?” Barb asked, waiting for him to nod, which he did. “I can't go home.”

He swallowed down a bite. “It's not safe unless... you are a good liar... willing to deny you saw me... or anything in that place.”

“I'd love to forget that, but it's not going to happen,” Barb said. She sat down next to him. “You said they'd know because Veronica saw. Is there a way we can make up a story based on what she saw that might let me go home?”

“Yes?”

“You don't sound very convincing.”

He shrugged. “I don't... Bud said... I had no... imagination. Kali said... too literal. I don't... the lab... had the story for Veronica... to live... that lie... about me... about me being... sick... and killing Bud... and after her... that... she could have lived with... but she... she wouldn't lie.”

“I think Veronica lies about a lot of things.”

“She didn't... she thought what they did... was wrong... and wouldn't cover for them... even if it meant her life... was... kind to me... but stupid.”

Barb bit her lip.

He looked at her, tempted to laugh. “You agree.”

“Well... yeah. I mean it was kind of stupid of her to risk it, but then... she's not wrong. They are. What they did is wrong, and if they created that thing, then... they're horrible, and I don't think I like the idea of lying to protect them, either.”

“Not them. You. Your family. Your friends.”

“Right. So... how do we do that? We don't know what they know, what they were told. We need to find out somehow. I can't go back until I know, right?” She frowned. “Can you? I mean, obviously not right now, but... can you?”

“Yes... and no. I could move around... without them knowing... before,” he said, leaning back and closing his eyes. “Took barely anything to start a firewalk. A cigarette was enough. Could move... here and her house... very easily... kept track... never got seen... found out... about Indianapolis... went there... found her. Told her things... couldn't because her house... not safe... but... she's not in Indianapolis... and firewalking... risks going there. And even if... didn't... can't now. Too soon after the last one. Hurts too much... too drained.”

“Okay,” Barb said. “We'll figure something out. It's a shame we couldn't get my car. That would probably help.”

He closed his eyes. “Never really needed a car before.”

“I suppose you don't, but us normal humans do.”

“Me freak.”

“Are you going back to sleep?”

He nodded. “For a bit. Should help. Promise... get you back home. Just... sleep first.”

“Glad you came,” Hopper said, giving Jonathan's mom a glance, and she grimaced, that same way she had been all morning, the one that told him that she wasn't the least bit convinced that this was real. He couldn't believe this, but then he did. None of them wanted to think Will was dead. His mom was having more trouble accepting it, but then Will was her son. It was different for her.

“This is wrong,” his mom said, but she let Hopper open the door for her anyway.

Hopper smiled at the woman at the desk. "Hey, there. I've got Joyce and Jonathan Byers here to look at the—to see Will."

She nodded. "I'll let them know you're here. Just a minute."

Hopper turned back to them, a small frown on his face. "No Veronica?"

"She said she'd seen it," Jonathan repeated the uncomfortable words from earlier. "She didn't want to come again. I didn't really like the idea of leaving her, but she flat out refused to come."

"Really?"

Jonathan shrugged. "If you'd seen her with Tommy yesterday, you'd have backed off, too."

That actually made his mom smile for a fleeting moment, and Hopper chuckled. Jonathan just shrugged. Veronica was a lot like his mom in that he didn't really feel like fighting with her, and she had it in her head she wasn't looking at Will's body. He couldn't blame her. He didn't want to do it himself.

The receptionist came back. "Should be a few minutes."

Hopper looked back at her with a bit of a frown. "What's taking so long?"

"Well, everything's been a bit chaotic around here without Gary," she explained, and Hopper's frown deepened.

"Without Gary? Where's Gary?"

"Well, I thought you knew," she said. "Those men from State, they they sent Gary home last night."

"So who did the autopsy?"

The receptionist shrugged. "Someone from State."

Jonathan thought that was a little weird, and he could tell Hopper did, too, but his mom seemed to be too out of it to notice, at least

before the man came up the hall to tell them to follow him. He led them down to a window, and Jonathan stood with his mom, telling himself he was strong enough for this. He was. She was, so he was.

The man pulled back the sheet, and Jonathan gagged at the sight of his brother, running down the hall to find the bathroom. He could hear his mom's voice behind him as he did.

"He has a birth mark on his right arm. Can you show that to me, please?"

He found himself somehow standing over a sink in the bathroom, not sure how he got there, his mom's question echoing in his head as he splashed water on his face and tried to remember if he actually puked or not.

He felt sick.

And he understood why Veronica hadn't wanted to see that again.

"You okay?"

He looked up at Hopper's voice. "I... yeah... I... It was harder than I thought, seeing him like that. I didn't... I'm fine."

Hopper nodded. "Why don't you come out here and sit with me?"

Jonathan walked back with him, figuring he'd get asked more questions about that party and the pictures he shouldn't have taken now that they weren't around his mom and Veronica.

"How's your mom doing?"

Losing her mind? "I don't know."

"How long's this stuff been going on?" Hopper asked, and if not for the concern in his voice, Jonathan might have told him to go fuck himself—or something close to it, though he could hear Veronica saying it. "With the lights and Will and the thing in the wall?"

"Since the first phone call, I guess," Jonathan said. She'd been convinced that was Will, and it just got worse from there, twisting

what Veronica said and making up more to go with it. “You know, she's had anxiety problems in the past. But this... I don't know. I'm worried it could be—Ugh, I don't know.”

Saying that felt like a betrayal.

“She'll be okay,” Jonathan said. “We'll be okay. My mom... she's tough.”

“Yeah, she is,” Hopper agreed, putting a hand on his shoulder, and Jonathan frowned at him, not sure why he was saying that. “Hey. She is.”

Jonathan started to ask him just what he knew about that when he heard the voice of the guy who'd led them down to that room.

“Ma'am,” he called after Joyce. “Ma'am, I need you to sign—”

She whirled back to face him, shaking her head with fury. “I don't know what you think that *thing* is in there, but that is *not* my son!”

“Joyce, wait a second,” Hopper began.

“No,” she said, shoving open the door and leaving before anyone could stop her.

Joyce was aware of Jonathan's car long before it got close. She knew the sound of it. It was as familiar to her as her own, that rattle of it, the quirks of its engine, the ones that worried her even though there was nothing she could do about the money they needed to repair it, and replacing it was some impossible dream.

“Mom, will you get in?”

“No, I I need to think,” she said, unable to do that in the confines of his car. She couldn't accept that body as Will's, and she knew it. “Just go on home.”

“Mom, will you just get in, please?” Jonathan begged, but she shook her head, waving him off. He just needed to leave. Let her breathe. She needed time. “Mom. Mom, stop.”

She didn't, continuing along the street. She heard the car's engine die and the door shut, and he came running up to her, catching her by the arm. "Stop."

"Just go home, Jonathan."

He shook his head. "No, this is not an okay time for you to shut down."

"Shut down?" Joyce repeated. She wasn't shutting down. She was trying to work through her feelings. She knew what she knew was crazy, but if Will was alive, then she couldn't be doing anything but right in refusing that body. "What—"

"We have to deal with this, Mom," Jonathan insisted. "We have to deal with the funeral."

"The funeral? For for who?" Joyce demanded. "For that thing back there?"

He stared at her. "Okay, let me get this straight. Will, that's not his body, because he's in the lights, right? And there's a monster in the wall? Do you even hear yourself?"

"I know it sounds crazy. I sound crazy," she said. "And so did Veronica when we said she just dreamed about that thing taking Will, but it did. It took Will."

"Mom, whatever Veronica saw does not mean Will is alive, okay? They found his body. We just saw it in there. You can't do this. It's crazy."

"You think I don't know that?" she asked. "It is crazy. But I heard him, Jonathan."

"It was blinking lights. Lights. In a house full of electrical problems."

She shook her head. "He talked to me. Will is calling to me. And he's out there, and he's alone, and he's scared, and I don't care if anyone believes me. I am not gonna stop looking for him until I find him and bring him home. I am going to bring him home."

She turned, leaving Jonathan standing there. She hated herself for it, but she couldn't give up on Will. She just couldn't.

“Yeah, well, while you're talking to the lights, the rest of us are having a funeral for Will! I'm not letting him sit in that freezer another day.”

She flinched, but she resisted the urge to scream at him that it wasn't Will. She was going to go home, she was going to talk to Veronica, and when she did, she'd know how to get her son back. That was all that mattered, getting Will home.

“You're certain the woman is on her way home?” Connie asked, looking over at her fellow agent, who nodded, the radio still against his ear. “Absolutely certain?”

“Her present course suggests she'll be here in about twenty minutes. It'll be cutting it close if we wait much longer.”

Connie nodded. She was aware of how risky the timing was on this thing. This was one of the first chances they'd had to put this part of the plan into action, and she didn't like it much, rushed as it had to be, but the window for doing it was delicate at best. If they waited too long, the house would be full of people again. If they did it too soon, the girl would die before she was found to be rescued, and while that would very likely lead Nine right back to them as they wanted, he'd come with fire and rage, versus grief and panic, which were the only allies one really had against a thing like that.

Weaken him by the girl's near death and his own emotions rather than feeding the one that had given him the strength to escape before.

“Now,” Connie said. “We don't have much time for this. And it has to be clean. She'll fight. Don't think she won't.”

“We'll handle her.”

Connie had heard that before too many times to accept it as a done deal. The driver pulled down into the driveway, and fortunately for

them this time, the girl was not on the porch. She would never have lingered when she saw the car. Connie got out, grabbing her supplies, and followed the two of the men inside the house.

She took in the Christmas lights and the lettering on the wall. The aunt had clearly lost her mind, and it was somewhat amusing, perhaps ironic, that they'd had no need to do anything to the woman to drive her over the edge. She'd done that herself.

"Jonathan? Can I get a ride?" Sawyer called, coming down the hall. "I need to go see—No."

She saw them and bolted for the back door, but the one that had gone around the back had come through in time to block her, trapping her in the kitchen. Connie could see her looking around for a weapon, but the boys caught her before she could get her hands on a knife.

"Let go of me," Sawyer said. "You can't keep doing this. You won't get away with it. I know I'm not crazy. I know this was all you, and I am going to fight you to—"

"Thank you," Connie said when the man covered her mouth. She looked at the girl. "I don't have to keep doing anything. You've caused enough trouble, and one way or another, this will end with us finding Nine again. So tragic, after all. You just couldn't handle the guilt of losing your cousin, and you took your own life."

The girl renewed her struggles, but with two men holding her still, there was no way for her to free herself. Connie stepped forward, taking the syringe out of her bag. She gestured to the other agent, who grabbed the girl's leg and lifted it up, allowing Connie to place the needle between her toes and inject the drugs.

She put the needle back in the bag and took out the bottle of pills with the fake label on it, dropping the few she'd brought onto the floor like the girl had done it by accident.

"Go get the bottles from the medicine cabinet," she ordered the one not holding Sawyer, watching as the girl's struggles slowed, the drugs doing their work. She would die within the hour if she didn't get

treatment, and Connie would be glad to be rid of her and this distracting side project.

And Nine. She would be all too glad to kill that brat.

“Put her down on the floor and this in her hand. Make sure her fingerprints get all over it,” Connie said, handing the bottle to the other agent. “And someone find me something she wrote.”

The other agent pressed the girl's hand around the bottle. “You think they'll check fingerprints?”

“Hopper is suspicious and possibly in love with the aunt. I think he'll check. And even if he doesn't, this should be flawless. We don't need anyone asking questions.”

Connie had tried to account for every variable. The location of the injection was very likely to be overlooked, and since the medication matched what was on the label that was supposedly her prescription, it would have to be enough. Trying to get the girl to take the pills would only have made a mess of things. This, though, should all seem neat and tidy, aside from the lack of note, though that was easy enough to deal with if they had a bit of her handwriting.

“Found something,” the other agent said, coming back in the room and passing her a notebook. She frowned, opening it and flipping through to the back where the girl had written the same two words over and over again.

I'm sorry.

“Perfect,” Connie said, setting it on the table and moving a pen near it.

She took another look around the room, checking the scene. The girl was on the floor, like she'd taken the drugs and fallen out of her chair, which would account for any bruising.

“We need a glass,” she said, going over to the cupboard and taking one out. She carried it over and forced it between the girl's lips before filling it with a bit of water and leaving it on the table next to the notebook.

“That everything?”

Connie nodded, pulling off her gloves. “Should be. Let's go before the aunt gets back.”

Joyce walked down the driveway, still arguing with herself and trying to shed the image she had in her head of Jonathan's disappointment. How much damage had she done to him over the years, she wondered, since that look was all too familiar to her? She didn't know that she could change what she'd done or what she believed, not even for him.

That would be the sane thing to do, but she was not sane, apparently. She was a lousy mother who was going to be locked away if she couldn't find Will soon and prove them all wrong, but she still couldn't accept that body as his.

The marks were wrong. That thing was *not* her son. It was meant to look like Will, but it wasn't him. It couldn't be him.

She would ask the lights. She'd shout from rooftops if she had to. She was getting Will back.

She walked up to the house and opened the door, shutting it behind her and sighing again.

Looking at her house had her wondering if she was crazy, but she knew she couldn't afford to think like that, not if she wanted Will back.

“Veronica?” Joyce called out. “I came back without Jonathan. He's making arrangements for a funeral, but that wasn't Will. I need to talk to you about what you said last night.”

She frowned at the silence, wondering if maybe she'd find Veronica out back smoking again. She knew now that was why she kept finding her niece outside before, despite the cold, though the girl didn't hide her habit anymore.

She went around the table, frowning at the notebook, and then screamed, dropping to her knees next to her niece.

“No, no, sweetheart, don't do this to me,” she begged, pulling Veronica into her arms, the pill bottle falling out of her hand. Joyce didn't understand. Veronica had seemed so... calm earlier. She was fine when Joyce and Jonathan left. This couldn't be happening. “Sweetheart, please, open your eyes. Look at me...”

Veronica didn't respond. Joyce reached back for the phone cord, pulling it off the wall and dialing the numbers with a shaking hand. This couldn't be happening. She was not losing Will or Veronica.

“Just... just keep breathing, okay? Please. Please don't leave us...”

26. Chapter 26

Summary for the Chapter:

Nine's attempt to reach Veronica is interrupted.

And... the aftermath of Joyce's find.

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter was... difficult. Not just because there was all this stuff happening at once, but that was certainly not easy to do and I think the timeline gets a little screwy, but I tried.

The other thing was... today I got to live Veronica's life with the constant panic attacks... seriously never felt this bad before, one right after another, and I was actually telling my mom that I felt like I'd been drugged it was so strange, but I guess I really just can't deal with the work stress right now? I don't know. It was just... a very unpleasant day.

And I did my best to research the stuff they'd do for overdoses and stuff, but it's probably still wrong.

And despite having fixed in my head from the word go that the running off into the night that Hop discussed happened on October 9th, it didn't end up fitting that way.

October 9

Veronica walked into her bedroom, shutting the door behind her. She was tired of trying to pretend at being social. Will had just glared at her after he got home from his friend's house, and she had sat in

uncomfortable silence until Jonathan got home, and of course, Will talked to his brother, so she just left rather than stay where she wasn't wanted.

She'd do it for good if she could, but she didn't know where she'd go. Joyce and the boys were the only family she had, and since she'd screwed Betty over, she had no friends left to speak of, so there was nothing.

She should just have died in the damned fire.

She pulled her shirt off and reached for her nightgown, the oversized shirt her aunt had given her, and she kicked off her pants, sitting down on the bed and wishing she could have another cigarette. She'd been trying not to take too many of Joyce's, but there was nothing to do here, and she was used to having a lot more, including one before she went to bed.

She looked out the window, wishing once again that he'd be there. She knew it was stupid. She wasn't some damsel in distress for him to come rescue, no princess in a tower. She would save herself if she had any idea where to go or how to get there.

She supposed she could try and get a job, but she was still expected to do school and no one thought she actually could, so it wasn't likely she'd get a job, even if there was one here. Hawkins seemed pretty small, from what little of it she'd seen, and maybe there weren't any jobs to speak of.

She saw something move out of the corner of her eye, and she frowned, rising. Wait a second. That almost looked like there was someone out there.

No, that was crazy. Paranoid. She was being stupid, since she had to have made up that whole thing about the people drugging her in the yard, right?

She sighed, turning away. The sane thing was accepting that there was a fire and it killed her parents and the rest of it... that never happened. There was no boy, no conspiracy, no lab, just her own dumb luck that led to her surviving when her parents didn't.

She sighed, looking down at the burn on her arm. That was right, wasn't it?

No. No, there was an entire day before the fire that was clear to her, so clear, and he had been there. Sure, what he'd shown her he could do seemed crazy, but that didn't mean it wasn't real. He could still be very, very real.

She hated the way she couldn't stick to one opinion or the other. She should know what she was doing. She should know what was real. She wasn't stupid. She was better than this.

She shuddered and ran her hands over her arms, looking out at the yard again.

The dog started barking, and she frowned. Had she actually seen something out there? He was out by the sheds, the dog, that was where his house was and his dishes, so he wouldn't be over here for her to see him.

She rose and looked out into the night. She swore someone was there. She knew there was.

She pushed the window open and leaned out, trying to get a better look. "Hello?"

No one answered, which she should have expected. She turned away, going back to the bed.

He leaned back against the house and frowned, wishing he'd thought to bring something to shut up the damned dog—he liked dogs, really, and he wished this one liked him, but it was starting to piss him off. A lot. Still, the dog was only part of the problem.

Veronica was acting like she saw someone, which would have been fine if it was him, but she hadn't even looked in his direction. He turned back to the dog, eying it and assessing his options.

What the hell. He wouldn't lose much if he set the thing free, and if it tried to bite him, he had a simple fix for that. It wouldn't even hurt the dog.

He didn't understand why he didn't want to hurt, it, not exactly, because he could have solved his problems easily enough by killing it, but he wasn't something he wanted dead. He'd been thinking more about that since Kali, about what should live and what shouldn't, about how much killing he'd done and could do and whether he even wanted to.

He'd kill Papa if he could, and the blonde, anyone that hurt Veronica. The others he wasn't sure he cared about. Most of the others who'd hurt him were already dead, so he didn't need revenge in that way. He just needed something for the future, and that was Veronica.

He walked back, kneeling in front of the dog. "You want to protect your family? Like a good dog?"

The dog whined at him, and he held out a hand for it to sniff. "Relax. I'm not the threat."

The mutt edged forward and sniffed at him. He smiled at the dog when it started licking him and decided this dog wasn't that bad. In some ways, it reminded him of Slushie. He flicked a hand over and burned the rope off, using the part around its neck to guide him toward the other side of the house.

"There. Somewhere over in those trees, I think," he said, nudging the dog forward, and it ran, barking up a storm toward the trees in the back.

He swallowed. They were here. They were actually in the yard watching Veronica's house. Did they know he was here or were they just hoping he'd show up?

He didn't know, but he couldn't let them find him here or know he was alive. The dog might have chased whoever it was off, but that didn't make it safe.

Damn it, he had wanted to try and get Veronica away from here. He didn't know where he'd take her—back by Kali, maybe, to start, and then they'd find somewhere else. As long as it was somewhere the lab couldn't look for them, it would be enough, wouldn't it?

He heard voices, and he ducked back against the house as they argued.

"Will, that was really rude," the older one was saying. "I don't get it. Didn't you have a good time at the Wheeler's? Why are you being so mean to Veronica now?"

"It was fine until I got home. Then... she was there, and I... I don't know. It was like it all came back. All the frustration with the game and losing my room and having to share with you and how unfair it is you gave up stuff, too, and you acting like it's nothing and you're okay with it—and I got so irritated... and it doesn't help she looks like Mom, okay? Mom should be the one home at the end of the day instead of us barely seeing her. Mom should be here, not Veronica."

The other one sighed. "I know, but things will get better, and where is she supposed to go, Will? You know she has no one, and she... she was supposed to graduate and go to college. Now she's not even in school. Her whole life is gone, maybe her future, too, and she wasn't doing anything wrong by watching tv tonight."

"I know. I just... I'm sorry, Jonathan."

"Don't apologize to me. Apologize to Veronica. I don't need it. She does. Can you imagine what it's like for her? She's in this house thinking none of us want her, that she should have died in the fire, and that she's a burden... We have to make sure she knows she's wanted."

"That's the problem, Jonathan. I don't want her here."

"Mom does. And I don't know... I think once she's had some time to deal with what happened, she will make the house better. We all do in our small ways. She just hasn't had a chance yet."

"Why do you like her?"

"She's family," Jonathan said. "And... more than that... she's... you know how Mom had it really hard when Grandma died and stuff? This is... it's like that, only we can be there for her unlike Mom's sister and it's setting something right there. I know it is."

“You're insane.”

“Maybe, but I think Veronica could be happy here if she had a chance, and I'm going to give it to her, okay? You should, too.”

He frowned against the wall. Was he wrong? Was it not the lab? Was this place actually good for Veronica? If he was wrong... Maybe he shouldn't take her away from family. That mattered, to normal people. He wasn't normal. Kali called him brother, but they weren't family. He didn't have family.

Could he really take Veronica away from hers?

Again?

November 10

Mike's friends were angry. Well, Lucas seemed angry, but Dustin was just watching, waiting, like Eleven was. She knew they expected something of her, and she was used to that. Papa always had expectations, and she lived to please him.

Or she had before that night when she ran away.

“What?” Lucas demanded, looking at Mike for an explanation. He was still holding the radio. It made noise, but Will wasn't talking now, not like before.

“We keep losing the signal, but you heard it, right?” Mike asked, looking at Lucas and Dustin eagerly.

Lucas snorted. “Yeah, I heard a baby.”

Mike frowned. “What?”

“Mike, you obviously tapped into a baby monitor,” Lucas said. “It's probably the Blackburns' next door.”

“Uh, did that sound like a baby to you?” Mike's friends seemed to be

answering yes without saying so. "That was Will."

Lucas sighed. "Mike—"

"Lucas, you don't understand," Mike said. "He spoke last night. Words. He was singing that weird song he loves. Even El heard him."

"Oh, well, if the *weirdo* heard him, then I guess—"

"Are you sure you're on the right channel?" Dustin interrupted before Lucas could finish.

Mike shook his head. "I don't think it's about that. I think, somehow, she's channeling him."

Dustin got excited. "Like like Professor X."

Mike smiled after a second. "Yeah."

Lucas stared at Dustin. "Are you actually believing this crap?"

"I don't know, I mean—Do you remember when Will fell off his bike and broke his finger? He sounded a lot like that."

Lucas was really frustrated now. Angry, even. "Did you guys not see what I saw? They pulled Will's body out of the water. He's dead."

"Well, maybe it's his ghost," Dustin suggested, making her frown. She didn't know what a ghost was. "Maybe he's haunting us."

"It's not his ghost," Mike insisted.

"How do you know that?"

"I just do."

"Then what was in that water?"

"I don't know. All I know is Will is alive. Will is alive. He's out there somewhere. All we have to do is find him," Mike said. He looked at the others, pleading with them, and she thought he might have convinced Dustin, but Lucas no.

She closed her eyes, concentrating on the radio again.

“Veronica!”

The others stilled and stared, looking at the radio. It didn't crackle anymore. She winced, wiping at her nose.

“Why did Will scream for his cousin?” Dustin asked, frowning. “He hates Veronica.”

“I don't know,” Mike admitted, “but that was definitely him, right? You heard him.”

“Yeah, but all we heard was *one* word, and that's not enough. That could be... I don't know. Maybe she knows a thing or two about ventriloquism,” Lucas said. “And Dustin's right. Why would he be calling for Veronica?”

“Wait a minute, last night,” Dustin said. “Veronica started talking about Nine, remember? Like she knew what Eleven was and could do and there was a Nine, too. She said she thought that Nine could get to where Will was. We all forgot about it because they found that body in the water, but she even took El to the side and spoke to her afterward.”

“That's right,” Lucas said. “What did she say to you?”

Eleven bit her lip. She couldn't tell them that. “Danger.”

“Right.”

“Look, we just need to get Will back on the radio,” Mike said. “Forget about Veronica. Focus on Will. If he's out there, and we can reach him on the radio—We need to get El to a stronger radio.”

“Mr. Clarke's Heathkit ham shack,” Dustin said. “Though you know, if the vampire was right about what this Nine can do—”

“Forget it,” Lucas said. “The Heathkit's at school. There is no way we're gonna get the weirdo in there without anyone noticing. I mean, *look* at her.”

Eleven frowned.

“We can fix that,” Mike said. “Let’s go get some of Nancy’s stuff.”

Eleven watched them go, thinking. Veronica had warned her last night. She’d seen a lab man and sent her away. She was kind, like Mike, but bitter like Lucas. Still, if she was right, and Nine could help find Will, then they would need him.

And even if he couldn’t... Will’s call meant that Veronica was in danger. She needed help.

Eleven closed her eyes again, reaching out, not for Will, but for Nine.

Barb watched as the boy ate another bag of potato chips, looking a little less pale than he had when he first woke up, which was somewhat of a relief. She had been worried about him when he stayed out for as long as he did. She hadn’t lied to him about what she’d done after they got to this cabin, though she had left out a bit about her looking around and trying to understand where she was.

She still had no idea, which was part of why she stuck around, though not the only reason. He’d saved her life, gotten her out of that creepy place, and she couldn’t just leave him here to die even if she was still a little scared of him.

Seriously, he could move between worlds using fire. Being afraid of him just made sense.

She took a breath, still trying to figure out what she did now. “That thing doesn’t have a face, right? So... what if I said I was taken by somebody wearing a mask?”

“That would probably be believed,” he said, setting the empty chip bag aside. “And give them an excuse to hunt me down, but yes. That would work.”

Barb grimaced. She supposed they would. Everyone would want to find this terrible person who took a teenage girl, right? Well, maybe she was exaggerating her own importance, but she wanted to believe that they’d still look for the guy that took her, and if Veronica’s

boyfriend had been hanging around for a while, he'd be assumed to be the one.

"I'll tell them he was taller."

He flipped her off, and she bit her lip.

"Okay, so that's not enough, but we can think of something, can't we?"

He shrugged. "You're doing the thinking."

She wondered if that was him being too literal as he claimed he was or actually making some kind of joke or just being difficult. It was really hard to tell with him. "What's your name, anyway?"

"Don't have one."

"Everyone has a name."

He shook his head. "The lab gave me a number. That's it."

"A number?" Barb asked, frowning. That couldn't be right. He was a person, not just a lab rat, but he held up his hand, showing her the number marked on his skin. "Nine?"

"Veronica said I could use the one Bud tried to give me, but I'm not a Dean, and I didn't like Jason. She said... initials. JD. Or Jay. Nine... I know it. I'll answer to it. You can use it."

Barb grimaced. She didn't know that she wanted to, but she wasn't calling him Dean and he didn't like Jason. Veronica's other suggestions might work. Jay was basically like a short version of JD. "Okay, Jay, so if we tell them it was a tall man in a mask—"

"Fuck," he said, grabbing his head like it hurt and whimpering a little. "Stop it."

Barb frowned. "What, you hated the name that much? You don't want to come up with a story that doesn't get them hunting you and —"

“Not you. She's in my head.”

“What?”

He hissed in pain and grit his teeth. “I have to go.”

“What?”

“Veronica. They went after her. I have to go.”

Joyce looked up as the paramedics burst into the house. She'd heard them come up, but she hadn't moved, unwilling to leave Veronica's side for a second. She couldn't. She might have lost Will—he was still out there, but he was lost—but she wasn't losing Veronica, too.

She watched them bring in the stretcher. Did they do that for everyone? She supposed they knew what they were dealing with, since she'd called for help. She didn't know if she should have put the girl in her car and drive her in or not.

She'd cared for her mom before she died, but this was nothing like that.

No, it was, just not in a way she wanted to think about, since Veronica's breathing was so slow, like her mom's had been at the end. Joyce hated that sound, that sight, *all* of it. This brought back such horrible memories, and she couldn't bear them.

“How long has she been like this?” the first man asked, moving away from the stretcher and coming toward her and Veronica. He knelt down next to Veronica, starting to examine her, his fingers on her neck. “Ma'am, how long has she been like this?”

Joyce trembled. “Um... ten, fifteen minutes, at least. I walked in and found her like this.”

“And this is what she took?” the other man asked, bushy eyebrows frowning at her as he lifted the bottle from the floor.

“I... I guess? She didn't... When we left to go to the coroner, she was fine,” Joyce said, twisting her lip. She didn't understand. Veronica

had been so... calm when they left, so resolute in telling Jonathan she wasn't going but that Joyce should because she knew Will best. How did this happen?

“Okay,” the blond said, checking the label on the bottle before grabbing a strange looking device and putting it over her mouth, squeezing the bottle part. “She ever take too many of these before?”

Joyce shook her head, her eyes still on what he was doing. “No, she stopped taking them a day or so out of the hospital. She hated being on them, said they made her sick.”

Bushy Brows frowned. “This bottle is empty.”

“You think I don't know that?” Joyce demanded. She'd seen it. She wasn't blind. “You think that doesn't scare me out of my mind? She—there was no sign of it, okay? If that's what you want to know, there wasn't. She didn't take her medication, even when she was hurting. She... she hated it. And she... was upset, she had problems, but my son is missing and she... she lost her parents a month ago and...”

“Ma'am, try and stay calm for us,” Bushy Brows said, and she nodded, though it was getting harder for her to breathe now.

“She's barely breathing. And her skin is so clammy and cold... She's... she's...”

“We've got her now,” Bushy Brows said. “She's in good hands.”

His partner nodded, and they lifted Veronica onto the stretcher. Joyce swallowed, still shaking as she watched them. The one kept the bottle squeezing going all the way out of the house, and she followed them out onto the porch, down into the driveway.

“Sorry,” Bushy Brows said. “You'll need to stay here.”

“What?”

“I'm sorry, ma'am, but there's not enough room. You can meet us at the hospital.”

“But—”

“Sorry.”

“So, Gary, tell me about these troopers that brought in Will,” Hop said, looking at the medical examiner across the desk. He couldn't help thinking about what that receptionist said, and he'd sent Powell and Callahan out to talk to Nancy Wheeler instead.

This was one of his stupid, paranoid side trips, but he had to see it through for his own piece of mind. Something felt wrong about all of this. He'd been out looking at that quarry the other day. Callahan had almost fallen in, and they hadn't seen anything.

And Joyce's story about the lights and the thing in the wall was crazy, but she knew her son, and she said it wasn't Will.

She could be out of it because of the grief, but if she wasn't, then state butting in on the autopsy was one hell of a red flag.

“It was about six of 'em, I'd say,” Gary told him, nodding as he spoke.

“They're all Staties?”

“Yes, sir,” Gary said, a bit too old school and manners for Hop's taste, at least right now. “Never seen that many troopers come with a body before.”

Hop hadn't, either. He hadn't even seen that many cops around a body before, not when he was working more high profile crimes in the city. The more he heard, the less he liked this. “They told you that they were gonna take care of the autopsy, huh?”

“Yeah,” Gary agreed. “Claimed jurisdiction. Kicked me out. Well, it all seemed a bit over the top to me, considering.”

“Considering what?” Hop asked. “Considering this was Will Byers and not John F. Kennedy.”

Hop wished the man hadn't said that. People had discussed those rumors for years, the ones that said the government covered up their part in Kennedy's assassination and that there was a second gunman on the grassy knoll.

Damn it.

Hop forced a smile, refusing to go too far down the conspiracy rabbit hole, not yet. "Thanks for stopping by, Gary."

Gary smiled. "Sure thing."

Hop watched him go, trying not to give into the paranoia. He had to talk to Steve Harrington and those other kids about the party and Barb Holland's disappearance. He couldn't afford to chase down a conspiracy that didn't exist.

Hop reached into his desk for his bottle of pills. One and he'd be on his way, just like prescribed.

"Chief," Flo said, coming into his doorway. He looked up at her, frowning. Her voice didn't sound right. Had the same note as it had when she told him to get over to Benny's.

"Flo?"

"You'd better get over to the hospital. Joyce Byers' niece just tried to kill herself."

"It's made of soft wood with a crepe interior," the funeral director said, and Jonathan stared at the coffin, struggling to accept that he was doing this for Will. His younger brother was dead. That shouldn't even be possible. Jonathan was supposed to go first, not Will.

Will was too good for this world.

"Uh, now, I I don't know what your budget is, but over here, we we have copper and bronze," the man went on, and Jonathan tried to find words. Cheap as possible was what he needed to say, but he couldn't, and then he looked over to see Nancy in the doorway.

He swallowed. "Can you just give me a second?"

"Of course," the man said, stepping away.

Jonathan walked toward Nancy, more relieved than he wanted to

admit to be interrupted. He didn't want to buy a casket, didn't want to think about burying his brother. This was wrong, all wrong. And yet he had to worry about what Nancy might want with him after yesterday.

"Hey."

"Hey," she said back. "I... I wasn't sure... I guess I just kind of assumed you might be here. I wasn't sure... I just—Can we talk for a second?"

He gave the salesman another glance and led her over to the chairs in the hall, motioning for her to sit. He wasn't sure what she was going to say, but he supposed if she wanted to lecture him, he deserved it. If she wanted an apology, he'd do it for himself, but not for Veronica. That was her doing, and he didn't think she had any intention of apologizing.

"I wondered if you could tell me what this was," Nancy said, reaching into her bag and taking out a taped together photograph. She held it out to him, and he braced himself only to frown when it was the one he'd taken of Barb putting her feet in the water.

"It's Barb. I took it while she was still sitting there, before Veronica screamed."

"I meant that," Nancy said, pointing to the dark shadow behind Barb.

He frowned again, shaking his head. It almost looked like a man, but he swore he hadn't seen anything that night. Though... Veronica had. She'd sworn she had. "It looks like it could be some kind of perspective distortion, but I wasn't using the wide angle. I don't know. It's weird."

"And you're sure you didn't see anyone else out there?"

"No, Veronica did, but from my perspective... She was there one second and then, um, gone," Jonathan said. "I figured she bolted."

"Steve and Tommy and Carol, they keep insisting it was a prank. The cops think that she ran away. But they don't know Barb," Nancy said. "She wouldn't do that."

Jonathan frowned. "Hopper didn't think she ran off. He believed Veronica when she said Barb was taken. He said he was going to speak to her parents and everything. Of course, that was after Will, and I don't know if he went or not."

"I went back to Steve's and I thought I saw something," Nancy admitted. She swallowed, meeting his eyes. "Some weird man, or I don't know what it was. I'm sorry. I... I shouldn't have come here today. I'm... I'm so sorry."

He looked down at the photograph. "That man look like this?"

"It's hard to say."

"But he didn't have a face."

Nancy nodded, miserable. "Veronica was right. It—he—was there—and I ignored it for the party, and Barb could be dead and—"

"We didn't find a body," Jonathan said. "We couldn't even find her shoes."

"What?"

He pointed to the picture. "See? She took them off to dip her toes in, but they weren't there when we went back. Her car was, but her shoes weren't. It was weird, and it... I doubted Veronica again because even if the car was there, the shoes weren't, and it wasn't like she'd grabbed them or Barb had time to put them on when she vanished."

Nancy considered that, frowning. "I... Steve was all worried about his dad's reaction to the party earlier. About the beers. Maybe he cleaned them up and didn't tell me or anyone else."

"Nice."

Nancy twisted her lip. "I admit, I wasn't very happy with him earlier, but he's not as bad as you think. He's still convinced this is a prank. I mean, I saw something, but since Veronica was so angry with me, she'd do it."

Jonathan snorted. "Yeah, right. She took them finding Will pretty hard, was down where they found the body, so... she was pretty upset. She was so sure she had this way to find Will and Barb, and then they found him in the quarry."

"What way?"

He tensed, not sure he wanted to repeat the story Veronica had told him, even if he had his doubts about the people listening who'd kill them if he did. He didn't have a chance to say anything as someone else came up to them.

"Jonathan. I've been looking for you," Hopper said, and he frowned, not sure what he could have done or if this was about his mom. She hadn't done anything crazy on the way home, had she? She couldn't have.

"What's wrong?"

"I just got word. Veronica's in the hospital. She tried to kill herself."

Jonathan stared at him, gagging again. He shook his head. "No, Hopper. She... no. I know she was upset, but she wouldn't have done that. You didn't see her at the school, how clear she was, how determined... she thought she had a way to find Will and Barb, and even if Will is gone... Barb might not be, and she wouldn't have given up. You should have heard her this morning. She... she was... She wouldn't."

He felt Nancy's hand on his back, and Hopper ran a hand through his hair.

"I don't know, kid. I haven't seen her myself. I just got word, and I know this is the last thing you need, but I didn't want you hearing it from someone else. You'd better come with me over there."

Jonathan nodded, feeling numb.

"Veronica Sawyer?" Hopper asked, and Nancy wondered if he would tell her to leave. She'd tagged along with him and Jonathan, not just because she wanted to know if Veronica really did know how to find

Barb, but also because she was still trying to believe it herself.

As harsh as Veronica had been yesterday, Nancy didn't hate her. She'd been worried about her before, that she was way too self-destructive, but this... she hadn't wanted this, even when Veronica was screaming that it was her fault that Barb was gone, that Barb might even be dead.

She didn't want Veronica to die.

"Are you family?" the nurse at the desk asked, and Nancy almost frowned. Hawkins was not that big, and with all the gossip going around, it seemed weird that they'd have to ask, even if the hospital wasn't in Hawkins itself.

"He is," Hopper said, nodding to Jonathan. "I'm Chief Jim Hopper, Hawkins police."

"Oh," the nurse said. "Well, they just moved her from the ER, I think. Let me just check on that."

She picked up the phone, and Hopper tapped his fingers on the counter, impatient. She eyed them with a frown. "Hey, Sadie. They finish moving that girl up there yet? Yeah. What room? Thanks."

She put the phone back down. "Room two-fifteen."

"Thank you," Hopper said, leading them on to the elevators. He pushed the button with a bit more force than necessary, and Nancy wondered if he somehow blamed himself for this. For not finding Will. That had to be hard.

She didn't know what they'd do if she couldn't find Barb.

The elevator doors opened, and Hopper stepped in, jamming the button for two.

"Hopper, if she's in a room, she's going to make it, right?" Nancy asked, and he looked over at her, frowning. She supposed she shouldn't have said anything, attracted attention to herself. "I mean... I hope she will."

Hopper shook his head. "Just... don't like hospitals. That's all. Come on."

The elevator stopped and he started down the hall to the room, past the nurse's desk. Jonathan could match his pace, but Nancy almost had to run to keep up. Still, at least they were letting her see Veronica.

Hopper pushed open the door, and Nancy swallowed, taking in the sight of Veronica on the bed and all the machines hooked up to her. "Damn."

"Are you the girl's father?" a man in a medical coat asked, and Nancy saw Hopper flinch. "Hi. I'm Doctor Pratt. I just got up here myself, had to check in with the ER and find out all about our girl."

Jonathan gave him a look. "Our girl?"

"She overdosed on her pain medication," Pratt went on like he hadn't heard Jonathan at all. "She was taking... let's see here—"

"No," Jonathan said forcefully. "She wouldn't have taken that stuff. She gave it up two days after coming to our house. It made her sick, and she hated it. She wouldn't have overdosed on it. I don't care if she was—and she wasn't—she wouldn't have taken that stuff again."

Pratt gave him a sympathetic smile. "I know it's hard to understand when our loved ones are hurting so much and we can't help them, that we sometimes don't even know how bad it is until it's too late, but I'm afraid she had too much in her system for this to be an accident."

"You're not listening," Jonathan said. "I said she wouldn't have—"

"Jonathan," Hopper said. He faced the doctor. "What's the damage? What are we talking here?"

"Well, the main concern is how badly the drug affected her breathing. She suffered from respiratory depression and was given Naloxone on the way in when she stopped breathing. She's stabilized now and on oxygen therapy. We're going to monitor her to see if there is additional damage to her system. She hadn't developed full-

blown hypoxia yet, and her time without oxygen was short, so we're hoping for minimal brain damage, if any."

"Jesus," Hopper said. "Anything else?"

"Well, like I said, there could be secondary damage to her other organs. We won't know until we've monitored her for a while. She's at risk for liver damage as well as the possible brain damage I already mentioned. And her lung function was compromised, so we'll be looking at that as well. She's got a lot of tests and care ahead of her. As soon as she's conscious, I will have her speak to one of our staff psychiatrists."

Hopper nodded. "Okay, thanks, doc. Hey, where's her aunt? They sending her up here or what?"

"I'm afraid she was alone as far as I knew."

"What? Joyce found her. Why isn't she here?"

"I can't answer that. Now if you'll excuse me, I want to get those tests scheduled, but as I said, things could be a lot worse. She should be fine. She was found in time," Pratt told them, giving them another smile before leaving the room.

Nancy leaned against the wall, her hand on her chest. "That's supposed to be reassuring?"

Jonathan shook his head. "This is so wrong. He—where the hell is my mom? There's no way she wouldn't be here if she found Veronica like this."

"I don't like it, either," Hopper said. "You stay with Veronica. I'll go see what's going on with your mom."

"Hopper—"

"I know. Just... don't leave your cousin alone, okay? She shouldn't be alone."

27. Chapter 27

Summary for the Chapter:

The morning seems innocent enough, but there's a threat out there.

Hop finds Joyce and learns what happened when she didn't go to the hospital.

Notes for the Chapter:

Um... I apologize for sharing too much in author's notes. I am a bit bad with... social stuff and this is the most I talk to people a lot of the time, and it was... a very strange day yesterday.

I'm also wired kind of wrong and write to cope, so it actually helps me to do this... when I don't write is when I worry.

That said... I think I had a rather interesting idea for the end, but I guess we'll see how well it works. I thought maybe I'd created problems by having Lonnie in jail at this point of the fic, but it worked out surprisingly well, I think.

October 10

“Jonathan?”

He looked up at his mom, frowning to see her already in his room at this hour. She had to work, and he knew she did, but it wasn't like her to be ready an hour in advance. She was always pushed to the last minute, usually because she hadn't gotten enough sleep after getting home so late.

“Yeah, what is it? Is something wrong?”

“Oh, no, baby, I just wanted to ask if you'd do me a favor. I called over to the school this morning, and they said there's some paperwork I have to fill out to get Veronica transferred and so they can request the records from her old school and everything. They said they'd have them ready at the front office, and they told me it was fine if you picked them up, and since I have another double today, would you mind? Please?”

He almost laughed. Like he'd really refuse something she asked of him. He never did. And this was something so simple he'd have to be a real jerk to say no. “I can do it. Are you sure she's up to it? She's still pretty... quiet.”

“I asked, and she said she'd rather go than be stuck around the house all the time. She's bored, she's lonely... it's better for her to try school. We tried the store, and that was awful, so... School. You said you'd drive her, and that's something... You know, I never even asked if she knew how to drive? She could have a license.”

Jonathan almost said something about not having a car, but he decided not to. If he was forced, he'd share his with Veronica, but he wasn't too happy about it. He didn't have much, and the car was a piece of crap, but it was still his. He'd bought it, it wasn't anyone else's. He'd saved up the little extra he could scrounge for years, paper routes and mowing lawns and other odd jobs, just to have that thing. Lonnie hadn't done that for him, and his mom never would have been able to, even if she'd wanted to more than anything.

He grimaced when he thought about how he'd put the money his cousin had sent at Christmas toward the car or something else he needed.

“It's not important now. We don't have three vehicles, anyway, though if that money comes through for her, I suppose she can buy whatever she wants,” his mom said, shaking her head. “Okay, I need to find my keys and get going and—I heard that, Will Byers. Are you laughing at me?”

Jonathan heard his brother giggling and had to smile.

"How do you lose your keys every night, Mom?" Will asked, sitting up and shaking his head. That was kind of an age old mystery in this house.

"I told you my theory," Jonathan said. "There's a black hole in the couch, and every night it sucks Mom's keys into it from wherever they are."

"Oh, yeah?" their mom asked, smiling.

"Technically, if there was a black hole in our living room, none of us would be here," Will said. "The gravitational force is too strong. Nothing could get out, not even light."

"Hmm. I see Will the Wise has spoken," their mom said. "Tell me, if you can't even see it because there's no light, how do you know it's there?"

"Inference," Veronica said as she passed through the hall, getting frowns from everyone.

"Um... she's actually right," Will said. "You infer it's there by the effect it has on stuff around it. It'll create an accretion disk that makes for really bright objects around it and you can tell from the stars orbiting it."

"Oh," their mom said, smiling again. "I see."

"No, you don't," Will said, and Jonathan groaned at the pun, throwing his pillow at his brother.

"Where's Chester?" Will asked, and Veronica looked up from her soggy cereal with a frown. She hadn't realized the dog was missing. He'd been barking for most of the night after she went into her room, but she hadn't paid much attention beyond that. "What did you do to our dog?"

Jonathan turned back from the fridge. "Whoa, Will. Hold on one minute. Did you just do what I think you did?"

"I know she doesn't like him. She hasn't since he jumped on her that

day he thought she was Mom. He can't come in the house because of her. Now he's gone."

Veronica pushed her cereal away from her, rising from the table. She wasn't even going to dignify that. She hadn't done shit to their dog, and she resented being accused of it. She understood Will didn't want her here, but that didn't mean he got to accuse her of everything wrong in the universe.

"Will, Veronica hasn't even been outside today. When could she have done anything to the dog?" Jonathan asked. "And I don't think she would. Being scared of the dog is one thing. Hurting it is another."

"But he's gone."

"So he slipped his collar again. He's done it before."

Will shook his head. "He didn't have a collar because he lost the last one and we haven't replaced it yet. We had to improvise, and the whole rope is missing."

"You mean it came loose from where it was tied down?" Jonathan asked, frowning. "You know, he was barking a lot last night. Maybe he thought there was something he had to go after and he pulled until he got free. It wouldn't be the first time."

"But—"

"Chester's pretty good at taking care of himself," Jonathan said. "If he chased something out of the yard, he'll come back. It'll be fine. Just... Veronica will watch for him while we're at school, and if he's not back by the time we're home, we'll go looking for him. I promise. Now you'd better get going, or you'll be late."

Will sighed. "What if something happens to him? He could run out and get hit by a car or something."

"There's not usually much traffic out here," Jonathan said. "And he could come home in the next five minutes. He never wanders that far."

Will sighed. "I want to go find him now."

Veronica thought about the cigarettes she'd stolen from her aunt's pack and shrugged. "I'll go."

"What?"

"See? Veronica will find him," Jonathan said, giving her a grateful smile as he guided Will toward the door. "You get going to school."

She went toward the back door. She'd better find that damned dog, then, or Will would blame her for the rest of her life.

"Yuck," he said, pulling back as the dog licked his face, pushing it away from him and trying to calm down before he burned something. "Gross. Since when are we friends?"

The dog whined at him, and he sighed, looking around. He supposed the thing thought he was going to get it back home, which he supposed he probably should since he'd been the one to let it free, needing it to chase off the person in the trees. He was sure it was someone from the lab, and he owed the dog for getting it away from Veronica's house without him having to burn anything and give himself away.

He had to get close to her, maybe today, and see if she was happy here. She wasn't safe from the lab, but if he did stay away from her because she was with her family, well... the lab would stop watching her eventually. They wouldn't kill her if he didn't show.

Well, not unless she told people the truth, which he didn't know if she'd do. She should know better, but he couldn't know what she'd do if she thought she was safe. She might tell these others what had happened and get them killed, too.

He hoped she wouldn't, but he didn't know. She was so convinced the lab was wrong and she had to stand against them, and she might still believe that even if she had lost so much to them already.

He rose, giving the lab another glance. He hated that he could see it from here, and he didn't think much of the fence separating it from the rest of the world.

They were too close to Veronica.

“Come on, then,” he said to the dog, walking back toward the house. It barked and followed after him, tail wagging. Dogs were funny things, he thought, and he wasn't really sure why this one liked him, but he'd take it, since maybe now it wouldn't bark constantly when he was there and give him away. He needed to come and go without anyone noticing him unless he wanted them to.

The dog stopped, turning around to growl, and he backed into the trees, leaning against one of the larger ones, trying to stay out of sight as he waited to see what had gotten the dog's attention.

“That's a negative. It's just the damned dog again.”

He swallowed. If that man got any closer, he'd see him for sure, and the whole damned thing would be over. They'd come for him and kill Veronica, maybe her whole family again.

The barking got louder, and then he heard it, Veronica's voice. His stomach twisted up as she was about to walk right into a trap. If she saw that man from the lab, they'd kill her.

“Chester? You out here? Chester? Will's worried about you. Dog?”

Oh. So the dog had a name. Okay. That was good to know, but he wished he could get her away from here. He could probably run and grab her, and if he only needed a cigarette to firewalk, he could get them out, but they'd get seen, and that was not good.

“Shit,” the man said. “The girl's coming. Back to secondary positions. Don't know why they don't just have cameras in there.”

No cameras. That was good to know, but still not worth the risk of going inside the house.

He looked over to see Veronica being greeted by the dog. It licked her face, she grimaced, taking hold of its rope and leading it back to the house.

Well, the dog was safe and going home. He just wished the same was true of Veronica.

November 10

"I heard about Shepard," Dyer said, and Brenner didn't turn back to look at her. He did not need her blaming him. He'd sent that man in there to find out what they were up against, and it was a calculated risk at best. They all knew the odds were bad, but none of them could deny the importance of what Shepard had done—attempted to do—not even her.

They had to know what was on the other side of that rift.

"You can save the lecture," Brenner said. "I want to know how things stand with the girl."

"Which one? Veronica Sawyer or Barb Holland?"

He refused to be baited. "Holland was taken by that thing. One can only assume she's already dead. She won't be found, not in that place, so I suppose it's best she just disappears here as she did there. Tell me about Sawyer."

"She's stable for now. The aunt found her and called an ambulance which got there in time—"

"Because it was waiting for the call," he said, and Dyer shrugged. "So she's alive?"

"I was hardly going to bring him down on us here. If Nine's out there, and we do believe he is, he'll burn this place to the ground if she dies. He might still do it if she doesn't, but at least now he has to go through us to get to her, and there are many 'legitimate' roles for our people to play at a hospital. He won't be able to walk in without being seen."

Brenner nodded. "Still a risk, taking her to the hospital."

"Yes, but it will solve many problems for us even if he doesn't make a move," Dyer said. "No one would believe any claim she made at this point. She's far too unstable, tried to take her own life, and if she

needs to be eliminated after the trap fails, it can be done. Easily and without anyone questioning it.”

Brenner nodded. That was something when this situation was getting more and more out of control. “And Eleven?”

“No sightings of her since that diner, but we have no conclusive proof she met up with Nine.”

Brenner had to hope it would stay that way. The worst possible thing to happen would be for any of the children to find each other. “Those deaths in Illinois. Have the police found anything of use?”

“No. They appear to be random crimes.”

“Random crimes targeting former employees.”

“May I remind you that you already have two crises on your hands? Would you really like to make it a third?”

Brenner did not, but he also didn't want to ignore it. “How long before you take further action against the girl?”

“If he hasn't shown by tomorrow night, he's not coming for her.”

Brenner looked back at her. “You think he would abandon her? Or do you actually think we've been wrong all this time and he's dead?”

“I think Nine has survived things he shouldn't and is annoyingly resilient, always has been. His tolerance for pain and stubbornness was always high, and his ability to withstand the electroshock you used to keep the girls in line was almost... impressive. Foolish and dangerous, but strong. He could be alive, and with this creature loose and feeding—”

“You think it could have gotten him?”

She snorted. “Are you kidding? Maybe we'll get lucky and that brat will kill it for us, because you know if he finds it, he'll fight. He always has.”

Brenner nodded. Yes, he was a fighter. And that, for better or worse,

was what they were counting on.

Joyce went back into the house after the ambulance left, still shaking, not sure how to react to any of this. What kind of monsters were they that they'd just leave her here, on her own, in no shape to drive, and take her niece away like that? Like... like it didn't matter and she shouldn't worry and it would all be fine?

For that matter, why the hell hadn't they said anything about what everyone said something about? She looked just like Veronica. Or Veronica looked like her. No matter how she said it, every stranger she'd ever met and plenty of people she'd known all her life remarked on the resemblance.

Those paramedics must have been really damned focused to do their jobs without even one comment about it.

And maybe that made them professionals.

She still thought they were assholes, though, leaving her like this.

She looked around her, trying to remember where her keys were. She went back to the couch and checked it again, biting her lip and fighting tears when they weren't there. Veronica needed her, and she couldn't find her keys.

Damn it.

She marched down to Jonathan's room, crossing to the dresser and grabbing the portable stereo. She carried it with her out to the living room, setting it down and cranking the volume up as she pressed play on that song Will loved so much.

"Tell me I wasn't wrong," she begged. "Tell me you're still here. Tell me it wasn't—tell me I didn't fail both of you. Tell me... tell me you're here. Please. Talk to me. Talk to me."

She thought she heard something, and she swallowed, turning the radio off. "Will?"

"Mom?"

"Will," she said, turning to face the wall, the same one that thing had tried to come through. "I'm here. I'm here."

"Mom!"

She thought he must be on the other side of the wall, so she ran outside, but there was no one there, no one at all. She ran back in, afraid she'd imagined it all over again. "Will?"

"Mom?"

"Oh, baby," she said, scrambling to tear down the wallpaper, needing to see the wall and when she did and it pulsed red, like some unholy flesh, she wanted to scream but she could almost see him, her son, her Will. "You're here."

"Mom, is Veronica with you?"

She flinched. "No, Will. She's not. She—"

"I could hear her. Like I can hear you, but she couldn't hear me. I tried to talk to her, but she didn't hear me, and she... she screamed."

"I know. Baby, she tried to hurt herself, and she's in the hospital now and—I need to—"

"I couldn't see them, I couldn't see her, but there were other people in the house, Mom. She was scared. And she screamed, but I couldn't get to her."

"What?"

"She was talking to someone. I don't know who. I couldn't hear them, just her. She was so scared, Mom. I don't know what happened, but it must have been bad because she went all quiet and... is she dead?"

"No. No, baby, she's alive. She's in the hospital. Will, I need you to come back home. We need to get you back home. We have to—"

"Mom, Mom, it's coming," Will said, completely panicked now. She could hear it, that same noise from before, and she was just as scared as he was.

"Tell me where you are," she said, not understanding how he could be here and not here at the same time. "How do I get to you?"

"I don't know. It's like home, but it's so dark," Will said. "It's so dark and empty. And it's cold!"

"Okay, I can—"

"The fire mage. Mom, the fire mage, he could move between this place and that one, he fought the demogorgon. He can help."

The creature made that noise again, and she could feel Will start to panic. "Mom? Mom!"

"Listen to me," she said, trying to keep both of them calm. "I swear I'm gonna get to you, okay? But right now, I need you to hide."

"Mom—"

"Hide, Will. You have to stay safe until I can find you."

He got quiet, and the red faded, and she stared at the normal looking wall, not sure what to do now. Had she done wrong telling him to run? Had she lost him now, for good? She turned back to the couch, running and grabbing the axe from last night.

She smacked it into the wall, over and over again, trying to reach where Will was, but when she got a hole she could see through, it was just her yard. Her car in front of the house.

No Will.

And Veronica... she could be dead. Joyce had just ruined her house, and for what?

Hop turned down the driveway, taking the curves faster than he should, but he didn't care about that. He knew Joyce. She had to have a damned good reason for not going to the hospital with her niece, and he had to find her. She had both him and Jonathan worried, and after what happened to Veronica, Hop was starting to think the worst, and he didn't want to, wouldn't have ever thought

that would be Joyce, but then she'd had a rough month, and her niece's loss right after Will's could have pushed her too far.

No. She had Jonathan. She wouldn't do that to him.

He parked the truck in front of the house, shutting it off and getting out, staring at the hole in the wall, and then she came out, running toward him.

"What the hell happened?"

"Hop," she whispered, throwing her arms around him like she hadn't in years, not since high school. She clung to him for a minute, shaking, and he winced, trying to understand.

"Joyce, did you do that to the wall? Or was that Veronica?"

"Oh, God, Hop, I... They wouldn't let me go in the ambulance with her, and I couldn't find my keys again like always and they weren't in the couch, and I just... I needed to make Will talk to me, to tell me he was still alive because if he was... then... then Veronica... she'd make it, you know? She'd have to, because she... she wouldn't have done it if she wasn't blaming herself, right?"

He pulled back to look at her, putting his hands on her face. "Joyce, you don't know that's why she did it."

"There was a notebook on the table. It said *I'm sorry* over and over again... but... Hop, when I spoke to Will, he said... he'd heard her in the house with others. She was there, and she was scared and... He thought the people she was talking to killed her."

Hop frowned. Damn it, he couldn't do this, couldn't get caught up in it, but he couldn't help remembering Jonathan's insistence that Veronica wouldn't do this and the state police taking over the autopsy.

"He couldn't see her... but he heard her... and I had to make him run... and I put a hole in the wall because he'd been there and I thought I could reach him... God, Hop, what have done?"

He knew how insane grief could make a person, especially when it

was losing a kid. "Jonathan's at the hospital with Veronica. I took him there myself after I heard. Let's get your coat, and I'm going to drive you over there."

She nodded, still shaken, and he hated seeing her like this. He walked in with her, letting her go to her room on her own. He went into the kitchen, wanting to take a look at this notebook she'd mentioned.

He went to the table, and there it was, just as Joyce had said, the page full of the same two words written over and over in blue ink.

He looked back as Joyce came in, struggling to put her coat on. "I... I found her here. I... she was on the floor... not moving... barely breathing... there was a bottle in her hand..."

"Her prescription."

Joyce nodded. "It was... She hated those drugs, Hop. Why would she take them?"

He didn't know. He had to figure she blamed herself a bit for Will disappearing, since she'd been home that night and saw something she couldn't explain, that she was maybe covering for that boyfriend of hers, but even if she was, why this?

"Come on. We should get you over to the hospital."

Joyce nodded. She didn't fight him as he led her back out to the truck.

"Are you sure?"

Jonathan looked up from his hands and over at Nancy. He wasn't sure why she'd come, if she was just doing this for Barb or not, but it was still awkward no matter what her reasons were. He swallowed as he watched her.

"What do you mean?"

Nancy bit her lip and looked over at Veronica. "That she didn't do it. You said she wouldn't, but are you really sure?"

He looked at his cousin and nodded. "Yeah. I am. I left the house thinking she was just... she was planning something, but not this. She was going to chase her theory. I knew she was, and I figured she'd go on her own because she didn't think I believed her or that Mom was up to it. Not this. She was so sure. When we talked about it as I was developing the pictures, she sounded so sure, and she wanted to go chase it down right then."

"Only Steve and everyone confronted you about the pictures and you ended up fighting instead."

Jonathan sighed. "Look, if I could take back the pictures, I would. I'd make it so I didn't because it was wrong and—"

"Your picture is the only proof we have," Nancy said. "We know it exists. We need... we need a better version of it, but we have proof. Hopper can't deny what your mom saw or what Veronica did if he sees it."

Jonathan wasn't so sure about that. "We can try enlarging it, but I'm not leaving Veronica alone right now. And I... I don't know why my mom's not here. She should be."

"She will be," Nancy said. "Your mom's a fighter, too."

That had Jonathan frowning, and he rose to go over to Veronica's side. She was a fighter. She'd shown that yesterday. She was stronger than this. It didn't make sense.

"Oh, God."

"Mom," Jonathan said with relief, looking back at the doorway. She came over to him and hugged him, holding on tight.

"I couldn't find my keys again," his mom said, shuddering. "They wouldn't let me in the ambulance... and I couldn't find my keys... I was so stupid..."

"It's okay, Mom. You're here now."

"It's not, Jonathan. It's really not."

He looked over at Hopper, frowning.

"Your mom did some damage to the house. I'll fix it later. You just stay here," Hopper told him. "I've got a few things to look into—"

"The pictures from the party," Nancy said. "They'd help you, right?"

"Uh, probably," Hopper said. "That's really not—"

"You use the darkroom at school, right? And they'll lock it up soon, no game today, so if you want to reprint them, we should probably go now, shouldn't we?" Nancy asked. "Not that I want to push you to leave, but if the photos can help, then maybe... maybe we should make sure they get done as soon as they can be."

His mom nodded. "I think that might be best, Jonathan. I... I can stay here, with Veronica. And you can develop the pictures and come back."

He winced. He didn't like this much. "Mom—"

"I can do this," she said. "I should do this. You... you just go do what you need to do."

Firewalking hurt like hell.

Which was probably a bit ironic, if he understood the concept right, which he wasn't sure he did, but still, it was moving through a fire and hell was supposed to be full of eternal fire and yeah, that was something, wasn't it?

He didn't know what it was, but judging from the gasp that he'd just heard, it had not gone unnoticed this time around.

He had already seen the floor under his hands. Tile. Clean, more or less. He wasn't in the other place, the dark one, but still in their world, but judging from the way he hurt, he'd at least passed through it on the way, and that was not a good sign.

He forced himself to move, trying to stand and using the first thing he touched for support. Metal with wheels. And bars.

And fuck. A hospital.

“What... how did... what are you... how did you...”

The woman's words were stuck in a confused loop, and he swallowed. Not the way he wanted to meet Veronica's aunt—he wasn't sure he wanted to meet her at all, and it was strange how much she looked like Veronica—but it couldn't be helped.

“I'm not crazy,” she insisted. “You... you weren't there a minute ago, and now, you're here. How did you do that? How could you... Where did you come from?”

He wasn't about to explain that. He couldn't. He really didn't know what to do now because he couldn't tell her who he was or why he was here or anything. No, he couldn't talk to her. She'd never agree to let him take Veronica, and even if she did, they would kill her for helping.

Damn it, if they had done this to trap him, then they could already have heard her talking to him, and that meant they'd be in any second.

He rushed her, pushing her back against the wall and covering her mouth, keeping his voice to the lowest whisper she could still hear. “Listen to me. I was never here. You never saw me. You have no idea what happened.”

She stared at him, eyes wide. He scared her, and he didn't like it, but he wasn't sure there was any other way.

“You're confused and tired and scared.. You didn't see anything.”

She gave a small almost whimper, and he realized she was going to fight him probably half a second before she did. He grimaced, but he knocked her head back against the wall, hard. She managed a small groan and he caught her before she fell.

He hoped he hadn't hurt her too much, he hadn't wanted to, but he couldn't let her scream or cause a big fuss, not if they were probably listening. He didn't know if they were filming, but he didn't think they were because if they were, they'd have come in already, as soon

as he showed up, while he was still weak. Not that he was much better, he still hurt, but he had to ignore it.

He pulled her over to Veronica's bed, knowing he didn't have much choice, as wrong as it was. He took off her jacket and nodded to himself at the shirt she was wearing. It had some buttons. He could work with this. He went over and checked the closet, frowning when it was empty except for the bag of clothes. Veronica would need them, so he took it, setting it aside as he went back to Veronica.

He pulled off his coat, setting it on the bed before reaching over to untie her gown. He wanted to tell her that she'd rather have the coat anyway, or at least in his experience it was better. He slid the gown off one arm and replaced it with the coat sleeve, pulling out the medication they had her on and lifting her up to move the coat around her back. He took the other side of the gown off her other arm and helped it into the sleeve before taking the gown off completely, and he flushed at the sight he got just a peek of, pulling the coat over her as quickly as he could.

He carried the gown over to her aunt and put it on over her clothes. Okay, so it didn't cover her legs, not completely, but he'd put the blanket over her in a minute. He took the sensor off Veronica and put it on her aunt, doing the same with the other patch, and then he took a breath and lifted Veronica off the bed.

She felt small and tiny like this, even if she wasn't, not so much.

He set her next to her aunt for a second, then lifted the older woman up into the bed, arranging her in place where Veronica had been. He fixed the wires so they weren't tangled, and he put the blanket over her feet. He let the iv rest next to her arm, not forcing it in because the medication was probably not a good thing, not if they gave it to Veronica.

She didn't stir, and he winced, hoping he hadn't done a lot of bad there. Veronica wouldn't like it.

He turned back to her, kneeling down next to her. He took a cigarette out of the pocket of his coat and lit it, sticking it in his mouth and gathering her into his arms. He put the bag of clothes in her lap.

He closed his eyes and took her with him into the fire.

28. Chapter 28

Summary for the Chapter:

Hop chases down the conspiracy.

Notes for the Chapter:

I had so much I needed to do in this chapter... it felt like it just kept getting longer and longer but then I suppose I could have cut some parts or shifted them to the next chapter, but I wanted to finish off the day and have the next chapter pick up in the morning, so it's a bit longer. Not too bad, I hope.

October 11

“Veronica, sweetheart, I was hoping you could help me with these,” Joyce said, bringing the forms over to her niece. She'd done her best to fill them out after she got home from work last night, and she didn't know if she was just too tired or if she was being stupid, but in addition to that, she just didn't know enough.

Veronica looked up from her breakfast, frowning.

“Your mom and I... we really didn't talk much after she left Hawkins, and I just don't know enough about your family for some of these questions. I even got confused again... you were born after Jonathan, right? Day after or was it day before? I always get that confused. You'd think with the way Marion and I fought I'd know because it was like some kind of... one-up-manship for us or that she'd have rubbed my nose in how she had everything in place like the husband and the fancy house and money before she had you and all I had was a drunken Lonnie and no insurance for the birth.”

Veronica blinked, and Joyce winced, sitting down in the other chair,

taking out a cigarette.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't say all that and—"

"I knew," Veronica said, looking down at her lap. "About... about the stuff with my mom... and you. I knew you didn't get along."

That was an understatement, but Joyce wasn't going to go into that again. She didn't want to drag up all that unpleasantness again. Marion had been almost cruel sometimes, pointing out Joyce's failures, and she'd been bitter and angry back, since the choices she'd made were in part out of desperation, the gaping loneliness and burden that had been caring for their parents after Marion abandoned all of them, and that led Joyce to Lonnie again, in part, because even as bad as things were, he made an effort at pretending he was there for her sometimes, back in the beginning.

Hop had been gone by then, and falling in with Lonnie seemed natural at the time.

Veronica picked up the pen and went to fill in the first blank. She chewed on the end of it as she read over the next question.

"I don't know about this one," Veronica said, pointing to the question. "I wasn't even sure it was a question at first because of all stuff about athletics and not being eligible, but... isn't the school I'm zoned to attend this one? And what is with all the health questions? I don't know any of that crap. Can't they get that from my old school, too?"

"Maybe. I don't know. I can't see why this is all necessary, to be honest. You didn't live here before, you do now, you're supposed to be in school... this should be simple."

"They make this shit complicated on purpose," Veronica said. She filled out the part about any existing conditions with a no, but used capital letters on the part about prescriptions *No drugs. Ever.*

She passed it back to Joyce, who took it, frowning at the date the girl had given as her birthday. The exact same as Jonathan's? That couldn't be right. She'd say she was confused, but she knew her son's

birthday and assumed Veronica knew hers as well.

"This is right?"

Veronica frowned. "Why would I forget that? I've only known it all my life and celebrated it once a year."

"No, I know. I just... I could have sworn it was a different day. Not the same."

"Maybe my mom told you it was as some kind of passive aggressive thing," Veronica said, rising. "Um... I'm sorry. I... I must sound... I don't know... I... I think I always got along better with my dad, if I'm honest about it. I don't... he thought I was funny. She didn't."

Joyce wanted to hear more about that, she really did, but she didn't have time today. "Okay, well, as long as we've got the information we need, I'll have Jonathan drop it off, and they can call me if they have any questions. Maybe we can have you in school before the end of the week."

Veronica shrugged, and Joyce wished there was something else she could do.

She was calling that lawyer again, though, she swore it.

November 10

Joyce's head was pounding when she opened her eyes, and she reached up to touch the back of it, wincing as she did. It was so sore, and she knew she hadn't been drinking, though she hadn't slept much lately, and that always caught up to her, usually with a pretty bad headache.

She knew it wasn't that, though. She would have everyone thinking she was crazy again if she said anything about that boy that had appeared out of nowhere. She'd been standing next to Veronica's bed, watching over her, and then he was just... there. She didn't know how he'd done it. It didn't make any sense, but she knew what she'd seen.

She sat up and frowned, finding herself tangled in wires, the stuff that had been on Veronica now stuck to her, and she looked around the room in a panic.

Veronica was gone.

She yanked the cords off her, swinging her legs off the side of the bed and standing up. She turned back to the bed, trying to find the button to call the nurse, but she ended up not needing it. The monitors started screaming when she pulled free, and a bunch of people stampeded into the room a minute later.

She stared at them, swallowing. "Where is my niece?"

"Now, Miss Sawyer, you shouldn't be out of bed," the man in the lab coat said, coming toward her, and she backed away from him.

"I am not Veronica," she said. "My name is Joyce Byers. Veronica is my niece. I don't know where she went, but this kid—he came out of nowhere and hit me in the head and—"

"Please stay calm, Miss Sawyer. You took a large dose of a heavy narcotic. You probably saw some strange stuff. Things that weren't real, but you need to lie back down. We're not sure the extent of the damage yet."

"No," Joyce said, shaking her head as she looked for a way out. "Look, I know you think you're helping, but I am not Veronica. I am not hallucinating. I need to go and find my niece."

"I really wish we didn't have to do this," the man went on, and she saw one of the nurses come in with a syringe. "The last thing we want is to expose your lungs to another depressant, but if you won't calm down—"

"Listen to me," she said. "I'm not a seventeen year old girl. I'm a mother. I've had two boys, one of them is seventeen. I have the stretch marks to prove it. You need to calm down, not me. I'm not the one about to sedate the wrong person. God, my head hurts. No, don't you come any closer."

"Get her back to the bed. She's in no state to be up and around."

Joyce started for the door, wanting someone who would actually listen to her—damn it, if she'd only made Jonathan stay or something, she'd be fine. He'd tell them who she really was.

The orderly caught her, and she struggled, trying to free herself. “No, damn it, I'm not the one—I'm Veronica's aunt, you idiot. Ask anyone in Hawkins. We look the same. Let me go.”

No one listened, and she could only scream as the needle was forced into her arm.

Hop pulled into the bar's parking lot, making sure to keep the truck as far out of sight as possible. The man he was after should already be inside, so he wouldn't notice, but he'd still feel better if it was out of sight.

He hadn't asked official channels where O'Bannon was. He knew his paranoia was off the charts right now, higher than Joyce's, twice as insane, but between the stuff he'd seen on Brenner, the fact that they'd lied about that video tape, and now all the strange stuff with the state patrol getting involved with Will's body, his mind was on overdrive.

It didn't help that the damned pen had been black.

He hadn't thought much of it at first, not at the house, but later, looking at Veronica in the hospital bed, it had come back to him. The black pen next to the notebook, the words repeating over and over again—in *blue*.

He got out of the truck, having already switched his uniform shirt for a regular flannel, and headed inside the bar. He went up to the bar, making sure he found the jerk he was looking for, sat next to him, and ordered a whiskey, lighting a cigarette.

He took it, drank it down fast, too fast to really enjoy it, but that wasn't the point of this. “Another, please. And another for my, uh, friend here.”

O'Bannon looked over at him, surprised but pleased at the same time.

“Oh, thanks, man. Appreciate it.”

“Yeah, that's all right,” Hop said, taking a drag and smiling. “I'm, uh, I'm celebrating. My daughter, she won the spelling bee today.”

“Is that right?”

He nodded. “Yeah, that's right. 'Odontalgia.' That was the word.”

O'Bannon looked at him like he was crazy. He didn't see the threat in Hop, which was a good thing for Hop and a bad one for him. Made O'Bannon a piss-poor cop with lousy instincts.

“You know what it means? It's a fancy name for a toothache,” Hop explained. He shook his head, trying not to think of why that had come to him. “Yeah, she's smart. She's real smart. Don't know where she gets it from. I've been tryin' to figure that out for years.”

O'Bannon smiled. “Your daughter, she got a name?”

“What?”

“Your daughter?”

“What's her name?”

“Sara. Her name's Sara,” Hop answered, knowing he'd screwed that up. Damn it, Hop, you idiot. Why'd you make Sara a part of this?

“To Sara,” O'Bannon said, lifting his beer to toast, and Hop met it with his glass.

Hop drank to that, feeling a bit sick to his stomach at his own words. He missed her, he really did, and using as a cover was stupid and wrong, all sorts of fucked up. “I recognize you. Are you famous or something?”

“Uh, you might have seen me on tv,” O'Bannon said, flustered. “I, uh, I found that Byers boy.”

Hop nodded like he hadn't known that. “So, you on that case or what?”

O'Bannon shook his head. "I just saw him on patrol, you know? Dumb luck."

"So that quarry, that's, uh, that's state-run, where they found the boy, huh?"

"Yeah."

That was almost too easy, really. "Yeah, well, that's funny. 'Cause, you know, I know for a fact that it's run by the Sattler Company. Frank Sattler? Decent guy, still got a couple operational quarries up in Roane."

"Is that right?" O'Bannon asked, the friendliness disappearing just as Hop's had.

"Yeah," Hop agreed. "That's right. So why are you lying to me, man?"

"What's your problem, bud?"

"I don't have a problem," Hop told him with a thin smile. "I'm just a concerned citizen."

"Yeah?" O'Bannon said. "Well, stick your nose someplace else. The kid is dead. End of story. Thanks for ruining the game, dick."

Barb busied herself around the cabin, trying not to freak out over the fact that he'd up and left her here, alone, in the middle of nowhere. She already knew she wasn't going back to town on her own, not her current state, because even though she'd found a shirt to replace the one that smelled of that other place, she still didn't have socks or shoes.

She started by cleaning and dusting what she could, wanting to keep busy and knowing that two people could not share that one lousy couch. As it was, there wasn't even a spot for someone on the floor.

One of the other doors was a bedroom, and it even had a bed in it, though she wasn't sure either of them wanted to sleep on that mattress. Well, he probably wouldn't even know to care, but she did and it was a little gross. She took the sheets into the shower, though,

washing them up like she had her clothes—and she gave her top and jacket another scrub while she was at it. She couldn't do much about her pants, and she hadn't wanted to put them back on, but she wasn't wandering around pantless in this place, either.

She found a broom and started sweeping, trying to make it a little better to walk around here, not that the bare wood was much better, but she didn't know what else to do.

She was so making him get her some socks if he ever came back.

She wasn't so sure he would.

She kept herself busy anyway, trying to keep her fears at bay as she made the cabin a bit more livable. That had hardly been his main concern—she doubted he noticed much when he was around, seeing as he seemed to sleep like the dead—the unconscious—because of his abilities and only stuck around here to pass out and eat junk food when he came around.

He barely needed the couch.

She had just finished the thought when something hard thumped onto the floor, and she ran over to see him back again, this time not wearing his coat, which was wrapped around Veronica, barely. It fell a bit open as she slid out of his hold onto the floor next to him.

He didn't even open his eyes, and Barb swore he was half-dead again.

She swallowed and went over to them, checking each of them in turn. Veronica was breathing, and so was he, but that was about as good as Barb could tell right now. She really didn't like the implications of Veronica wearing pretty much nothing but his coat.

They wouldn't have done that to her, would they? They were just using her to catch him. A threat would have been enough, so long as he knew about it, and he did.

Still, at this point, she wasn't sure she'd put anything past people who could turn a kid into a half-deranged weapon and would use others as bait, that let real monsters out into the world.

Hop dug a bill out of his wallet and dropped it on the bar, knowing it was more than enough to cover the drinks. He didn't care about them, his mind focused on the lies and what the hell these people were doing to his town.

Hawkins was a quiet place. They had more drama in those old television shows of the fifties. True, they had their drunken brawls every now and again. They had shits like Lonnie Byers who didn't deserve the women they had and mistreated their families, even if it wasn't physical. They had rumors, a few too many people with small minds, but this wasn't like the city or even some towns not that far away.

They knew peace here, more or less, and these bastards had shattered it. He had two kids go missing, first the boy and now a girl, his friend was dead, and another girl might have tried to kill herself over what they'd done. They had a body, for Christ's sake. Joyce's son was dead, and they were covering something up, lying about how they found him, and it wasn't right.

Fuck that. O'Bannon wasn't walking away from this. None of them were. Hop would take this as far as he had to, and he would end it. They'd pay, not just for what they'd done to Will, whatever it was he shouldn't have seen, but for Benny and Veronica and Barbara Holland, too.

Hop caught him outside the bar, slamming him up against the wall. O'Bannon struggled, and Hop held him still.

"Who sent you out to the quarry?"

"No one."

That was the wrong answer to give. Hop's frustrations from the last few days got the better of them, finding an easy target in O'Bannon, the liar who was tormenting Joyce Byers without even knowing it. He hit his face first, followed it right up with a gut punch, and went back for one more round to the face, nothing less than he figured one of these bastards deserved.

Had they given Will any kind of mercy? Benny? They probably didn't

even know what they'd done to Joyce, Jonathan, and Veronica.

“Okay, let's try this one more time,” Hop said, holding the other man up against the wall, grabbing his face so O'Bannon couldn't look away. “Who told you to be out there? What were you doing out there?”

O'Bannon didn't answer, so Hop raised his fist in preparation.

The other man panicked. “I don't know! I don't know. They they just told me to call it in and not let anybody get too close.”

“Get close to what?”

“The body.”

“Who do you work for?” Hop demanded, but O'Bannon's didn't speak, his eyes on the distance. “The NSA? Hawkins Lab?”

The eyes. Hop looked behind him, seeing a black sedan parked not far away from them, almost exactly like the one Veronica had said came to the house the night Will disappeared.

“Who is that?” Hop demanded, needing to know who the hell was in that car and if they had gone after Veronica like she'd said.

“You're gonna get us both killed,” O'Bannon told him, and Hop frowned, thinking of Benny and Veronica. Was that really why Benny was dead?

Had those people done this to Veronica, too? Wasn't that Will said to Joyce?

“Who is that?”

The car started, and he ran forward, taking out his gun, but it had driven away before he could do anything else. He turned back to see that O'Bannon had fled.

He swore under his breath.

Still, he knew there was another way to get answers.

Nancy watched as Jonathan worked, the red light casting odd shadows over the room. She supposed she was being selfish, pushing him to develop the pictures when he would rather be back with his cousin, but Nancy needed to know what was in that one, needed to be sure. She had to do whatever it took to get Barb back.

She'd done enough harm, but she wasn't going to do that anymore. Not now.

And if Veronica really had tried to kill herself because she blamed herself for Will and Barb, then she needed this, too. She needed that picture to know that she wasn't crazy. That thing, the man in the mask, he'd taken Will, and Nancy knew from her own encounter with it that it was fast and terrifying. No one should blame Veronica for not being able to save either of them.

"And you're brightening," Nancy said, watching him put some tool she didn't know the name of over the negative.

"Enlarging," Jonathan corrected, and she wondered if she'd said something stupid like the picture couldn't be brightened this way or even at all.

"Hmm." Nancy didn't know any of what he was doing, and she was trying her best not to fidget, but it wasn't working very well. "Did your mom say anything else? Like, um, where it might have gone to or—"

"No, just that it came out of the wall," Jonathan said, lifting the tub and shifting the liquid around.

"How long does this take?"

"Not long."

"Have you been doing this a while?"

Jonathan looked up from the tub. "What? Photography?"

She nodded, thinking he was a little nervous and it was kind of... sweet on him. "Yeah."

He shrugged. "I guess I'd rather observe people than, you know..."

"Talk to them?" Nancy suggested, fighting a smile of her own because she knew he barely spoke to anyone. His brother or his cousin, maybe, and his mom, of course, but few others. Certainly no one at school.

"I know. It's weird," he said, and she frowned, trying to deny it, maybe out of politeness. "No, it is. It's just... sometimes people don't really say what they're really thinking. But you capture the right moment it says more."

That was so insightful. Nancy hadn't expected that of him. It made her curious. "What was I saying?"

"What?"

She shouldn't have to remind him of this, but she did. "When you took my picture."

"I know I already apologized for that," he said, fidgeting, putting his hand in front of his mouth and trying to find words. "I mean it. I shouldn't have taken that. I'm, uh, I'm sorry. It's just—"

"That's it," Nancy said, her eyes drawn back to what had shown up on the paper. She swallowed, the fear coming over her again, like she was back at Steve's and that thing was after her. "That's what I saw."

Jonathan looked down at the picture. "My mom—Veronica—I didn't... I knew Veronica saw something, but I didn't think it was this... and I figured Mom just... took what Veronica told us and ran with it. I thought she was crazy 'cause she said that's not Will's body. That he's alive."

"And if he's alive..." Nancy began, needing to believe that almost as much as they did.

"Then Barbara," Jonathan said. "She could be, too."

Nancy wanted to hug him, but she knew she didn't dare. She'd bump chemicals or something. She swallowed. "Um... we'd better develop the rest of the pictures, like we said. We can take them back to the

hospital and show your mom and Veronica, if she's awake."

Jonathan nodded, going back to work.

"Hey, Patty," Hop called out as he walked back in to the coroner's office. He gave her a wide smile, not wanting to involve her in this nightmare. She was on the phone, so she shouldn't be too hard to deal with, busy as she seemed to be.

"Hey," she said with a confused look on her face. "Need something, Chief?"

"Oh, you know," he said, giving her a helpless shrug. "I forgot my hat."

"Oh," she said, nodding.

"I'll just be a minute," he assured her, heading down the hall. He made his way back to the cooler, needing to get to that body.

He saw the patrolman before he got close, calling out to him when he recognized the cover of the book the man was reading. Somehow it seemed fitting that it was Cujo. "Hey, I love that book. It's a nasty mutt."

The officer stood, moving to block the door. "Hey, you can't be back here."

"Yeah, I just got off the line with O'Bannon," Hop told him. "He said that he needs to see you at the station. It's some emergency—"

"What the hell are you talking about?" the other man demanded, shaking his head. "I don't work with O'Bannon."

Damn it. That was what he got dealing with Staties.

"Did I say O'Bannon? I meant..." He tried and failed to come up with some other name, but he couldn't remember any, and he could already tell it wasn't going to fly. He wondered if this poor bastard was as scared as O'Bannon was by those people in the black car. "Okay."

He hit the man, left first, then a right, knocking him to the floor. He reached for the keys, breathing hard. God, he was in way over his head, and if he was wrong about any of this, there was no going back. He'd assaulted a state police officer. They'd yank his badge for sure.

He unlocked the door, going inside and into the other room with the fridges. The first one he tried was empty, but the second one had something in it. He pulled it out and lifted back the blanket covering it to see the boy's face.

He backed off, needing air, needing to breathe through it and get himself together. Few cops he knew dealt well with stuff happening to kids, parents or not, but he saw that body and flashed to his little girl, her lips blue as she struggled to breathe.

He put a hand over his face, refusing to give into that. Sara was gone, but Will, Will might not be. Joyce had said he was alive, and she could just be grieving, but there was a hell of a lot of other stuff here that did not add up unless he made it a conspiracy. He took a breath and moved back to the body.

He pulled the sheet off, seeing no marks from the autopsy. Everyone knew what that looked like, right? The Y right smack in the middle of the chest. Not there. He put a hand on the boy's chest and frowned. That wasn't right. It didn't feel like any body he'd ever touched.

This was crazy. A part of him said he wouldn't dare, but he did, taking out his knife and opening it. He took another steadying breath and leaned over to make the cut. He stopped, unable to do that to a kid, even if he was already dead, but he had to know. He forced himself on, cutting through the skin in the boy's stomach.

He stopped when it deflated, his fingers touching not flesh but.. cotton.

Joyce was right. The body was fake.

They'd ruined the Hamshack, and Mike felt horrible about it. He knew he'd do it again if it meant contacting Will, because he was still

alive and they had proof now, proof that had convinced both of his friends, though Dustin had been more willing to listen earlier. Lucas had been the hold out, but now he knew the truth. It wasn't just one word. They'd heard a whole conversation between Will and his mom.

Will was alive. His mom had promised him she'd find him, but how? How did they get to Will?

Especially with everyone else in the world believing Will was dead?

"What was Will saying?" Mike asked, not expecting an answer. "Like home, like home. But dark?"

"And empty," Dustin said from the stairs. "Empty and cold. Wait, did he say cold?"

"I don't know," Lucas said, frustrated. "The stupid radio kept going in and out."

Dustin sighed, looking up at the ceiling. "It's like riddles in the dark."

"Like home," Mike said, pacing. "Like his house?"

"Or maybe like Hawkins."

"Upside down," El said, her voice quiet and weak with how tired she was.

"What'd she say?" Lucas asked, looking around him.

"Upside down," Mike repeated, moving over toward the table. "Upside down. When El showed us where Will was, she flipped the board over, remember? Upside down. Dark. Empty."

Lucas looked at Dustin across the table. "Do you understand what he's talking about?"

"No."

"Guys, come on, think about it," Mike said, his hands on the board. "When El took us to find Will, she took us to his house, right?"

“Yeah,” Lucas said, obviously still mad about it. “And he wasn't there.”

“But what if he was there?” Mike pressed. “What if we just couldn't see him? What if he was on the other side? What if this is Hawkins and this is where Will is? The Upside Down.”

He made his point by flipping the board again.

“Like the Vale of Shadows,” Dustin said, and they all looked at him. He rolled his eyes, going for the Dungeons and Dragons handbook, flipping it open and reading from an article. “The Vale of Shadows is a dimension that is a dark reflection or echo of our world. It is a place of decay and death. A plane out of phase. A place of monsters. It is right next to you, and you don't even see it.”

“An alternate dimension,” Mike said. It all fit. It made sense. Insane sense, but sense.

Lucas frowned. “But how how do we get there?”

“You cast shadow walk,” Dustin answered like it was that easy.

Lucas almost lost his temper. “In real life, dummy.”

“We can't shadow walk,” Dustin said, his eyes going to El, “but maybe she can.”

“Do you know how we get there?” Mike asked. “To the Upside Down?”

Still lying on the couch, she shook her head, looking like she was sick and could sleep for days. The other boys groaned, not happy about this, but then Mike remembered something else.

“The fire mage.”

“Mike, this is not Dungeons and Dragons.”

“And our party doesn't even have a fire mage,” Dustin added. “Will uses fire magic sometimes, but he's not a fire mage.”

“Guys, don't you remember? Toward the end, when Will was panicking, he said something else. That the fire mage could move between our world and that one. That he fought the demogorgon.”

“We don't even know if the fire mage is real,” Lucas said. “You heard Will. He was panicking, and if he saw something over there, it could be anything. He's in some other dimension. That's crazy enough, but a fire mage?”

“What if he just distorted what he saw?” Mike asked. “A guy throwing a lighter could look like a he was casting fireball.”

“Or,” Dustin said, eying El again. “It could have been Nine. He could be the fire mage.”

Hop pulled the truck over on the side of the road, parking it close to the trees. The road was deserted enough he didn't really expect it to be seen, but he didn't really want to take chances with it. He hadn't seen any sign that he had been followed, not from the bar or the coroner's office, which meant that whoever it was in that black car had been watching O'Bannon, not him.

Not much of a comfort, Hop knew, but he needed what freedom he had now to get answers. Will wasn't dead, so where the hell was he? Why had they faked his death if he was still alive? Why the body and the giant cover up? What the hell had Will seen that got him taken?

Had Barbara Holland seen something, too? And Benny?

Veronica sure as hell had, and the more Hop thought about this, the more he believed she hadn't taken those pills earlier. Jonathan had doubts, Joyce had doubts—and Will had told her someone else was there—but the damned pen and the car... No. Those bastards, whoever they were, they were trying to cover their tracks.

He had to find out what that girl knew, but he had no way of knowing if she'd even be awake, and for now, she was probably safe enough. The real threat was probably right here, at the lab.

He used the clippers on the fence, cutting a hole to squeeze through,

and crawled inside. He made his way up to the main building, waiting against the side as people left work into the night. They seemed so ordinary, so unlike the people you'd think would be responsible for something like this, but one thing the army had taught him—grunts rarely knew the truth of anything that was going on.

He slipped inside, going down the halls, knowing he had to find that quarantined area he'd seen before. Whatever was going on, he'd bet it had something to do with in there. A couple lab workers came toward him, and he ducked into a side room before they spotted him, waiting for them to pass, all his nerves keyed up, knowing the kind of danger he could be in.

He found the quarantine, and he took a breath, unzipping it and stepping through. He went down to the doors, finding them locked. He frowned, seeing the security device and knowing he wasn't going to get past that any time soon.

Damn it.

He heard a gun cock, and then someone spoke. "Hands up."

He started to turn around, trying to calm down some itchy trigger fingers. "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa."

"Forgot all the cameras, bub?" the security chief asked him, looking at him like he was stupid.

He wasn't. He had to do this. No other choice. "Look, Dr. Brenner asked for me specifically. Okay? How else do you think I got in here?"

The other man wasn't convinced. He took the radio off his belt. "What's your name again?"

"It's Jim Hopper. Chief Jim Hopper."

"Yeah, I've got Jim Hopper—"

He swung while the man was distracted, knocking him out, taking his gun and pointing it at the soldier before the other man could draw

his weapon, moving forward and pressing him back against the wall. The man on the other end of the radio was asking them to repeat it, and it looked like soldier boy wanted to shout into it for help, but he was too far away.

Hop saw the badge on his uniform and snatched it. "Hey, you mind if I borrow this one?"

He swiped it and used it, backing through the doors, keeping the gun pointed at the soldier as he went through. He shot the panel on the other side, figuring that would buy him some time.

Maybe enough to find Will.

"Where do you think you're going?" a security guard demanded, blocking Jonathan's path toward the elevator. He'd headed straight for it when the nurse's desk was empty, not thinking much of it until this guy showed up.

"My cousin's upstairs," he said. "Room two-fifteen. I was going to see her."

The guard shook his head. "Did you miss the sign? Visiting hours are over. You'll have to come back tomorrow."

Jonathan frowned. He'd noticed it was looking pretty dark by the time he'd finished developing the whole roll of pictures, trying not to be embarrassed with Nancy watching him, but he hadn't realized it was *that* late. They'd been able to leave the school without anyone bothering them, and it was quiet when they did, but he hadn't thought he'd taken that long.

"My mom is up there, I'm sure she didn't go home," Jonathan said. The guard just looked at him, and he sighed. Maybe they forced her out, but how would she have gotten home? She hadn't driven herself here, didn't have a car. She had to still be here somewhere. "Can I just check? If she's here, I need to take her home."

"Look, kid, if she was here, she's gone. Only thing open now is the ER, and you're going to have to go," the guard insisted. "Don't make

me force you out.”

Nancy put a hand on his arm. “Come on, Jonathan. Let's go.”

He frowned, but she took his hand and his brain shut off, not able to think as she tugged him toward the doors. The guard shut them behind them, standing there to block them going back inside.

Jonathan shook his head. This wasn't right.

“You know, if she did manage to sneak back in, she'd probably want to stay,” Nancy offered, and Jonathan had to nod. His mom would want to be here, especially if she felt like she'd failed Veronica before, and who didn't after seeing her here? He couldn't stop kicking himself for not believing her.

“Yeah.”

“We can still show them the pictures in the morning.”

“We?”

She nodded. “We. I... I'm not proud of how I was acting before Barb disappeared. And Veronica was out of line, too, but I don't want her to suffer. I want her to get better, and if she actually hurt herself because she thought she was to blame or something... Then she needs to see those pictures. And... I don't want those words she yelled at me to be the last ones we ever spoke to each other. It was kind of neat, seeing her stand up to Carol at the party and kick Tommy's ass.”

Jonathan had to agree with that. “I think I actually got that moment on film. The one at the party. Veronica told me that Barb wanted a picture of Carol's face right then.”

“We can give it to her when we find her,” Nancy said. “Because we are going to find her.”

Hop hurried down the halls, hearing alarms blaring and voices shouting. He didn't have much time, and if he was going to find Will, it would have to be soon. He called out for Will as he checked each room, most of them empty and deserted.

One of them had him slowing down, a small room with no windows, just a cot on the one wall. A small stuffed tiger stared up at him from the bed, eerily familiar. Next to the bed, a small paper had been taped to the wall, a stick figure drawing with two people. One had two marks above its head, the other the word Papa.

He swallowed, feeling a little sick at the sight of it, especially the camera in the corner.

He forced himself on, down the hall. He could hear men approaching, and he ran the last part down to the doors ahead. He pushed the button, and the doors opened, allowing him to step into the freight elevator just in time to avoid the men coming around the corner. He rode it down as far as it went, stepping out into a darker place.

The air felt different, heavier maybe, and he could see things floating in it. He called again for Will, wanting to find him. The lights flickered, making the whole thing like something out of a horror movie. He coughed as he moved along, finding it harder to breathe.

He stepped into another room, staring in disbelief at the thign on the wall. It almost looked... alive. He swore it was moving, but it seemed dead, too.

“What the hell?

He took a step toward it, his hand almost touching it as it pulsed, and then something moved behind him. He drew his gun and faced it, looking around.

A man in a yellow suit came toward him.

“Hey.”

Someone grabbed him from behind, and a sharp pain hit his neck, and then there was nothing.

29. Chapter 29

Summary for the Chapter:

Joyce gets things ready for Veronica to go to school.

The mistake at the hospital is discovered by more than just Joyce.

Notes for the Chapter:

Um, at least one scene may have been a shameless one to do a later one, but... whatever. It was a sweet family moment, and there aren't enough of them. Especially with me. I love fluff and other stuff, just... rarely manage to write it. Mostly angst and drama and pain.

And I so didn't want to get into the betamax versus VHS debate and simplified it for myself with a VCR even if there was no sign of one in season one and season two's probably came from Bob.

October 12

“So... you're thinking tomorrow, then?” Joyce asked, wanting to be clear about this. She didn't want to get anyone's hopes up—not that she was sure Veronica would be excited to go to school, but maybe to be out of the house again—or start panicking about how to get all the school supplies together for Veronica until she was sure.

She could buy a couple notebooks and stuff from the store. Five dollars, maybe. They could squeeze that out, and she'd skip lunch to make up the difference. She swore, if she ever got a hold of that lawyer, she was going to give him more than a little piece of her mind.

“Yes, tomorrow, assuming we get the records from her former high school today,” the school secretary said. “As long as we have those, she should be fine to attend classes starting in the morning.”

Joyce nodded. “That’s... that’s great, but if I send her along tomorrow and you don’t have those records—are you going to send her back home?”

“I think they’ll make an exception under the circumstances,” Margie answered. “There aren’t that many advanced courses at Hawkins High, not so she’d have to test for placement, and it’s unlikely that her records would move her down a level.”

“From what I heard from my sister, Veronica’s actually very bright. They bragged about wanting to move her up to high school level before she was done with middle school,” Joyce said. “I know Marion wasn’t your favorite person—”

Margie snorted. “I don’t think your sister left behind any friends in Hawkins.”

Maybe not, but stealing Margie’s boyfriend to get to the man she later married had certainly soured things between Margie and Marion.

“Still, I don’t think Marion lied about Veronica’s accomplishments. When she does talk, she seems... very smart. She’s just been very quiet since she came here, which is perfectly reasonable, she lost so much. I just... I don’t want school to be another part of that.”

“Everything should be set for her to attend tomorrow. Jonathan can show her where everything is, and she’ll do just fine.”

“I hope so,” Joyce said. She took a breath and let it out. “There is one more thing, Margie. I know it’s probably gotten around and all by now, but... Veronica looks a lot like me. So... um... don’t be surprised or anything. And please don’t make a big deal out of it. She’ll be uncomfortable enough as it is, going in on her first day of school after it’s already in full swing and everything...”

“Joyce, I don’t know if anyone’s told you this lately, but you worry too much.”

Joyce forced a bit of a laugh and said goodbye, hanging up and looking around the store with a sigh. She knew she did, but she had so many reasons to worry. Still, the shop was dead, so she may as well pick up a few things for Veronica while she was here. She could pay for them when Donald came in later.

“So... I know we haven't had much of a chance to do anything lately,” his mom said, and Will grimaced, knowing exactly where the blame for that belonged, with his cousin, “but I have a few surprises for everyone tonight.”

Jonathan smiled. “I think you already managed one.”

She sighed. “I know. I'm usually not home in time for dinner, but today I am. And... I picked up *Tron* on the way home—I know you saw it at the Wheeler's, Will, but—”

“Awesome,” Will said, going over to grab the cassette from her. “You're going to love it.”

Jonathan just shook his head, but Will took it over to the VCR and put it in the machine, about to play it, but his mom held up a hand.

“First, I have something for each of you,” his mom said. “I remember someone had some cabbage looking fireballs, so...”

“New crayons,” Will said, grinning as he went over to take the package from her with a hug. He would have liked a bigger box, but he really only needed a red, so that was fine.

“And this is a bit more on the practical side, Jonathan, but since you needed one of these,” his mom held up a box marked fuel filter, and Jonathan actually smiled for it, taking it from her and kissing her cheek.

His mom turned back to his cousin then. “Your stuff is also very practical, but hopefully you still like it. I got you some notebooks and pencils and pens... because you get to start school tomorrow. Which, I know, not the greatest gifts or the most wonderful thing to hear but —”

"Thank you," Veronica said, taking the stack from her with a faint smile.

His mom smiled back and sat down on the couch next to her. "Okay, movie time."

Will started back to the television and stopped. "Wait. No popcorn?"

"After that meal, you're still hungry?" Jonathan asked, frowning. Will shrugged. He was still kind of full, but movies weren't movies without popcorn.

"I knew I forgot something," his mom teased, heading back into the kitchen. Jonathan frowned, looking over at her.

"Mom, I know I—you'd have said something if the lawyer—"

"I just got us some things we need and we're going to have a good night," his mom said. "This isn't much of a celebration, but I wanted us to have a good night together."

Jonathan's smile looked strained, and he went down the hall to their room without a word. Will shrugged, but Veronica stood, frowning.

"If we can't afford for me to do this—"

"We're fine," Joyce assured her. "It's just a couple notebooks and pens. Things you need, and you need school. It's okay. I'm just going to finish this popcorn and we're going to enjoy this movie together. Okay?"

Veronica nodded. "I'll just go put these away for the night."

November 11

"We have a complication."

Brenner was starting to believe that Dyer was an endless source of bad news. He didn't know how she'd gone from his most trusted

agent to the one he would almost gladly be rid of for her constant failures—failures she claimed were his—but he was growing increasingly frustrated with her and her inability to find Eleven or reacquire Nine.

Even if she'd killed the boy, he'd have more tolerance for her other disappointments.

“You mean the policeman. He saw far too much last night,” Brenner said, still irritated by the breach in security. Hopper should never have made it half as far as he did. Brenner didn't understand how that had been possible. They had cameras. There were men on the grounds. Trained, armed men, and yet Hopper had reached the ground floor and the rift. “Have you dealt with him, then?”

“I intended to,” Dyer said. “He would have overdosed on his pills and booze last night.”

Brenner frowned, turning back to look at her. “You mean he didn't? Why the hell not?”

“The complication,” Dyer answered, coming closer. “I think he'd like to believe his position would get his death more notice than that, but I doubt it. None of his subordinates are as paranoid as he is. No, they would likely not see further than the overdose and it would end this whole mess cleanly as we've moved the girl's car and allowed it be found to make her look like a runaway.”

Brenner nodded. “Yes, I can see that, but you have not yet explained why he's still alive.”

“When we closed down the hospital to restrict access and force Nine to go through us, there was only one person in the girl's room.”

“The girl.”

“So it was assumed,” Dyer said. “I told you we should have had live video surveillance in place before we did this.”

“And I told you to do whatever it took, so if you failed to install it, that is your mistake, not mine.”

"The window of time was limited. We didn't have long before the Byers woman returned home, and balancing the dose to appear fatal and yet not lose the girl—which we almost did en route—was delicate," Dyer said stiffly. "The idiots at the hospital moved her to the wrong room, and we could not get access to it when she had the police chief, her cousin, and another girl as visitors."

"I hear excuses, not explanations."

Dyer glared at him. "At some point in the day, the aunt was the only visitor in the room. Hopper took her from the house and brought her in to the hospital. After the incident with the child speaking through the wall or whatever it was."

Brenner had reviewed the footage. Something strange had happened to that wall, something they were at a loss to explain. "So the aunt prevented us from accessing the room? Are you completely incompetent, then?"

"I would have overseen it myself if they didn't already know my face," Dyer said. "And no, it wasn't that which was the problem. We got cameras into the right room later in the day, but the girl was alone by then."

"And?"

"And the aunt never returned home," Dyer finished. "At one point, there was an altercation in the room where the patient supposedly claimed to be the aunt and that the niece was missing, but she was ignored and sedated."

Brenner pinched the bridge of his nose. "Are you telling me someone managed to get in and switch the aunt for the niece and no one noticed?"

Dyer nodded. "Yes. I believe that is, in fact, what happened."

"How?" Brenner demanded. "How did they get past your teams and the surveillance you did have in place to get to her? And how the hell did no one notice?"

"The resemblance is strong, as you know, and a girl just gone through

the trauma of an overdose would show strain, which they assumed the signs of her aunt's age were, or so I would guess," Dyer said. "I haven't asked anyone. The main problem is figuring out how they got in to do it. None of her family would have made that switch."

Brenner tensed. "Nine. You think he managed to do it? And yet you don't know how."

"We'll investigate, but in the meantime, I believe we have to allow Hopper to live," Dyer said. "The girl has shown signs of trusting him. The aunt already does. And exposing the other officers to something like Nine would only give us more we had to eliminate. Hopper is still in a position where he could easily be removed. As, I fear, the entire Byers family will have to be once we have ended Nine's threat for good."

Brenner nodded. "Do what needs to be done. I want Nine and Eleven found."

Mike reluctantly joined his family for breakfast, not wanting to eat, but knowing that he had to go through the motions, not just to sneak El some food but so none of them got suspicious about what he and his friends were going to do today. They had to find Will, and that meant finding a way into another world, because El said there wasn't a Nine, so whatever Will meant by fire mage, it wasn't this Nine.

That was probably Veronica screwing with them. She didn't sound happy about knowing they called her a vampire.

The doorbell rang just as he sat down with his cereal. He frowned, but Nancy jumped up, grabbing her bag.

"That's my ride."

"Ride?" their mom asked, frowning. "No, wait, you're not leaving yet, young lady. I was supposed to take you in, and I know Barb is still missing, so who is giving you a ride? Is this Steve?"

"Of course it is," Mike said, rolling his eyes. "She's in love with Steve."

"It is not Steve," Nancy said. She sighed. "It's Jonathan."

"What?"

"No way," Mike said. "She's been hung up on Steve for months."

Nancy rolled her eyes. "It's not like that. I was talking to Jonathan yesterday when we found out about Veronica, and he offered to pick me up on his way to the hospital again so I could see Veronica before school. Well, and he... He might need someone to stay for a little bit so he can take his mom home. She's been there all night, and no one feels right leaving Veronica alone right now."

"Oh, yes, I heard," their mom said, shaking her head. "So tragic. And yet... you didn't mention you saw her yesterday."

"I... it was a long day. I was tired. Upset. Barb missing. Will's body found. Veronica in the hospital..." Nancy shrugged. Mike thought that it was such an obvious lie, but his mom seemed to be buying it. "I really should get going."

"Yes, of course," their mom said. "Make sure and tell Joyce I'm so sorry about everything she's going through and remind her that if she needs anything, just let us know. We want to help if we can."

"I will," Nancy promised. "So... I can go?"

Mike went to the window, wanting to see if she was lying or not, but sure enough, Jonathan's car was sitting at the curb in front of the house. He looked back at his sister, trying to figure out what she was really up to because this was not like Nancy. She would have to know that hanging out with Jonathan would make things awkward with Steve, and since when was she willing to risk that?

"Wait," Mike turned back to her. "Was Veronica awake at all? Did she... say anything?"

Nancy frowned. "No. Why would you care? You and your friends have never been nice to her."

He couldn't answer that. They weren't supposed to be out again the other night, so he couldn't tell them that they'd seen her the night

they found that body and that she might know something about Eleven or Nine, even if El didn't think there was a Nine.

Maybe they kept the separate? Maybe El didn't know because they didn't want her to know?

And if El didn't know, Veronica was the only one who knew.

“Did she really try and kill herself?”

Nancy swallowed. “Look, just leave it alone. You don't have to be a creep about it. I really should go, Mom.”

His mom nodded. “If they have any word on the funeral, let me know.”

“I will.”

“Are you okay?” Jonathan asked as he stopped the car in the hospital parking lot. It had been quiet ride over, nice and awkward, and he almost wouldn't have asked her about it, but he was starting to think maybe he shouldn't have picked her up, that she didn't want him to, and he didn't want to make things worse, more awkward, between them.

“Yeah.”

“You don't sound like it,” he said, hand on the door handle. “Nancy, if I shouldn't have picked you up or if you don't want to do this—”

“What? No.” She shook her head. “No, I was just... Mike was being kind of weird this morning, and I couldn't get it out of my head. He actually asked about Veronica, and it was... odd.”

Jonathan nodded, opening the door. “I guess I can see how it would be. Will and his friends never really... got along with her. They would avoid the house because of her. It... They got off on the wrong foot, you know? Her having to take Will's room and then being so drugged up and freaking out when Dustin touched one of her burns... I think if they'd met her when she was lucid, they would have felt different. She's smart, you know. Like Will is. She could have given those guys

a run for their money with the stuff she knows.”

“Yeah, and she still can,” Nancy said, getting out of the car and joining him in front of it. “She’s not dead, and we’re going to make sure she knows she’s not to blame for this.”

Jonathan smiled at her, hating himself a bit for it, because he knew that spending time with her wasn’t helping him any. He just found more to like, and he didn’t want to, not when he needed to get over her. He forced himself on, walking in with her, not saying anything else as he pushed the button for the elevator.

They rode up to the second floor in silence, fidgeting awkwardly, and just when he almost gave in and said something, the doors opened. He got out and frowned, hearing shouting that sounded very familiar and not in a good way.

He ran down the hall, ignoring the nurse yelling at him, and into Veronica’s room just in time to see his mom pick up a bedpan and hold it over her head.

“I swear, if you come near me with that needle again, I will smack you,” she said, about to lob it at the head of the nearest orderly.

“What the hell?” Jonathan asked. “What is going on here? Why are you—”

“Jonathan,” she said, relief washing over her, and she lowered the bedpan a little. “Thank God. I’ve been trying to tell them since yesterday, but no one will listen to me. I am not crazy. My niece is missing, and that is my son. Right there.”

“Look, I know that you suffered a bad trauma yesterday, but we need you to calm down and get back in bed. You’re not doing your health any favors.”

“Oh, no, I am not going near that bed,” she said. “I keep telling you—I am not Veronica. I am Joyce Byers. That’s my son, Jonathan, and you are going to leave me alone. The only thing I want from you—well, maybe an apology—I know some people would tell me I should sue—is to know where my niece is.”

"Veronica's missing?" Nancy asked. "How did that happen?"

"I don't know," his mom said. "I... I woke up in the bed with the monitors on me, and they kept saying I was Veronica. None of them would listen to me. They stuck a needle in me and made me sleep, and Veronica has been gone for hours now. Hours."

Pratt sighed. "Miss Sawyer, you know this isn't a very funny joke—"

"It's not a joke," Jonathan snapped. "That's my mom. My cousin is not here. And I can prove it."

He dug into his pocket and pulled out his wallet, opening it to take out the picture he'd taken last month. He held it out for the doctor to see. "There. My cousin, my mom, and my brother. I took that when they all fell asleep watching *Tron*. That's Veronica. This is my mom. They look a lot alike, but they are not the same person."

Pratt's face lost some color. "Um... I don't understand. We... She... That is..."

"Get out," his mom said. "Just... get out."

The doctors, orderlies, and nurses all left, and she dropped the bedpan. She started to shake, and he went toward her, touching her arm. She turned to him and wrapped her arms around him.

"Oh, God," she whispered. "I was afraid they'd do it again. Drug me. No one would listen. I know we look alike, but this... it's insane..."

"She looked really bad after the overdose, and you... aren't your best right now," Jonathan admitted, knowing better days were years behind his mom. "You hadn't slept in days or changed clothes."

She snorted, but he could feel her shaking. "She's gone. And no one would listen again."

"We're here," Nancy said. "We'll listen. And... I think Hopper would, too. We can all tell that Veronica's gone. We knew it was you, not her. I don't... I don't understand, though. Did... did she do this, switch places with you?"

His mom pulled away from him, wiping her eyes. “No, I... I'm not talking about this here.”

“If Veronica's somewhere in the hospital—”

“She's not,” his mom said, sounding way too assured of that. “And I am not staying here another minute. Let's go. Now.”

Barb checked on the sheets again, giving her shirt another wash, and hung it up to dry. She was really hoping that smell would come out, though she honestly didn't know if she would ever wear it again even if it did. She just didn't know how to explain changing her clothes, since she was still having trouble figuring out how she was going to tell anyone even part of this and be believed and not killed for knowing a kid who could create fire with his mind.

She supposed she could pretend he scared her, but letting him get hunted like that didn't seem fair, even if he was kind of dangerous. He'd saved her life, and she owed him. She'd be dead or trapped in that place without him, so she was not turning him in to those lab people.

She couldn't give him to the police, either, because the lab would get him, and she felt a bit wrong about that, but she had decided a life for a life and whatever else happened, she'd keep to that. If he killed someone else now, she could change her mind, but for now, she wasn't going to say anything about him.

She came back into the front room, stopping with a start to see him sitting up. He hadn't noticed her, his eyes on Veronica as he combed his fingers through her hair, the gentle act at war with the kind of destruction she knew he was capable of.

“Did they... take her clothes? Did they... um...”

He looked up, shaking his head with obvious fatigue. “I... hospital gown... switched it... didn't... mean to... see anything... was just... bit. Have to... apologize...”

Barb was both relieved and a bit unsettled by his revelation. She

grabbed one of his bags of chips and carried it over to him. He didn't have many left, and while she'd found a few cans of food in the cupboards, she thought they might be a little dicey given their age.

"Here. Eat. You need it."

He opened the bag, leaning back and stuffing several chips in his mouth. He chewed them down and groaned. "That one... really hurt."

"Is that why she's not awake?"

He shook his head. "No. Shouldn't have affected her. Was just... going into the dark place, forcing myself out... found her in hospital... had to grab her fast... and go before they came... pushed hard. Hurt me... don't think I did anything to her."

"She has been out longer than you have."

He finished his chips and turned back to Veronica, wiping his hand on his jeans before touching her cheek. "They did this."

"You know that for sure?"

He nodded, leaning his head down next to hers. He closed his eyes, and Barb had to admit they looked almost cute like that despite the circumstances.

Then Veronica jerked up, screaming, and Barb jumped back in surprise, her own heart going a mile a minute. He moved to take Veronica's hand, getting her to look at him, and when she saw him, she threw her arms around him, shaking and sounded like she was fighting tears.

"They tried to kill me."

"I know," he said, closing his eyes with a wince. "I... I'm sorry."

"I couldn't... couldn't stop them," she said, still shaking. "I... I couldn't get away... couldn't fight... they held me... drugged me..."

He tightened his hold, and Barb thought Veronica's words scared him as much as she bet they made him angry. "You were in the hospital..."

when I found you. I... I took you... from there.”

She looked up at him. “They... it was a trap... how...?”

He gave her a slight smile, brushing back her hair. “Switched you... for your aunt.”

Barb stared at him. That was insane. Had it actually worked?

“You didn't.”

He nodded. “Didn't want... her hurt... but... they wouldn't... go after her... like you... and couldn't let them... find me there. Had to go... had to get out...”

Veronica laid her head back down on his chest. “I was... going... find... you.”

“Dangerous.”

“You... you can firewalk... you can get to where Will was. Where... where that thing took... Barb. Have to help her... you can help her.”

“Um,” Barb said, hating to break up the moment but also figuring Veronica might work herself up if she didn't say something now. “He already did.”

Veronica's head shot back up, and she leaned around him. Barb lifted her hand in a little wave, feeling really awkward now.

“He fought that thing off and got me here,” Barb explained. “We're safe, even if I don't know exactly where we are. He was still recovering from it when he heard you in his head and went to find you.”

“What?”

“Not Veronica,” he said. “Was... is complicated... explain later. Need... sleep again.”

Hop woke in a panic, reaching out to fight things that weren't there.

He looked around, breathing hard, and his confusion only worsened when he took in his own living room. He could see drugs and empty beer cans strewn all over his table, including a syringe and the familiar yellow tubing he'd seen thousands of junkies with during his years in the city. He could feel the sweat staining his shirt, but it wasn't what he'd been wearing when he was in that place.

He knew he'd been in Hawkins Lab last night. He'd gone there after confronting O'Bannon and finding out Will's body was a fake. He'd seen some weird shit.

He hadn't been drinking, not more than that whiskey he'd had to fool O'Bannon. All of that was real. He'd seen it. That freaky thing on the wall. The room that looked like a prison but probably belonged to a kid.

Something was very, very, wrong at Hawkins Lab.

He swallowed, eying his pills again, hearing Veronica's voice in his head, talking about the car and the drugs they'd forced on her not long before Will was taken.

And the girl had asked him about bugs.

Shit.

Hop rose, tearing through his house, overturning each bit of furniture and looking under it, in the table legs and cushions, taking off lamp bases and removing bulbs. He'd never been more grateful to not have much in the way of stuff after his divorce, though every new thing he saw became a potential target. He broke his phone taking it apart. His bedroom was a mess. The couch would have to be replaced.

He was starting to think he was just paranoid when he took off the light fixture and found it. A bug. Damn. They'd bugged his house.

Bastards.

He threw it on the floor and smashed it.

He kept checking everything else, double checking, and then someone was knocking on his door, and he stopped, tensing up. Shit.

They were here. They knew.

He grabbed his gun and went to the door, opening it up to see Powell and Callahan looking at him like he was insane.

He probably looked it, though.

“Whoa,” Callahan said, taking a step back down. “Hey.”

“Jesus, Chief,” Powell said. “You all right?”

He wasn't, but he couldn't tell them that. “What are you doing here?”

Powell grimaced. “We tried calling, but—”

“Yeah, the phone's dead.”

Callahan exchanged a look with Powell before speaking. “Hey, so Bev Mooney came in this morning all upset. Said that Dale and Henry went hunting yesterday and they didn't come back home.”

“She thought they were on another binger, but she's not so sure now,” Powell added, and Hop knew that would have been true most of the time with Dale and Henry, but right now, all bets were off.

Callahan nodded. “I think this whole Will Byers thing has everybody on edge.”

“Where was this?”

“It was at the station.”

Hop almost swore. Sometimes Callahan seemed like a real idiot. “No, no. Where did Henry and Dale go hunting?”

“Oh,” Callahan said. “Uh, out near Kerley.”

“Mirkwood,” Hop whispered, thinking that the thing that had taken Will and Barb, the one that was in Joyce's house, it might well have gotten Dale and Henry. Damn it. More people missing, and he couldn't stop it.

“What?”

“Okay,” Hop said, about to tell them to go back to the station when he saw Jonathan's beater pulling up next to the patrol car. He frowned. “Um... you go out there and see if you can find their campsite or anything. Be careful.”

“Chief?”

“Just go,” he said, looking at Joyce as she got out of the car. “I'll take care of this.”

Powell saw Joyce and shook his head. Callahan frowned, starting down the steps, but then he saw Nancy Wheeler and turned back. “Oh, hey. Uh, they found Barbara's car.”

Hop didn't know the car had gone missing. Last he'd heard, it was still in front of the Harrington kid's house, though he never made it over to look for himself. “What?”

“Barbara Holland's car,” Powell said. “Seems she ran away after all.”

Bullshit she did.

“Staties found it late last night at a bus station,” Callahan said. “Funny, right? They keep doing our job for us.”

“Yeah,” Hop muttered, thinking it was Hawkins Lab covering their tracks again. “It's real funny.”

“Joyce,” Hop said, coming down the stairs and looking rough, like he'd had the kind of night she'd had, though she was pretty sure he hadn't had to threaten anyone with a bedpan just to be heard. “What's going on? Why are you here? Is Veronica—”

“She's gone, Hop.”

He winced. “Shit.”

“Not dead,” Nancy said. “Missing.”

“What?”

Joyce sighed, putting a hand to her head and leaning against Jonathan's car. "It'll sound crazy when I tell you it."

"Everything's crazy these days," Hop said, looking over to where his officers were pulling out of the lane. He turned back to her. "Couple hunters are missing now, too. Not sure what to think. Just... tell me what happened."

"I..."

"Come on, Mom. We all want to know," Jonathan said. "No matter how crazy it seems."

She gave him a look, not sure he meant that, but she still had to try, she supposed. "Um... I was there, with Veronica. She was still asleep. Unconscious."

"Docs told us they didn't figure she'd be up for a while," Hop said. "Were they wrong? She woke up and left while you fell asleep or something? That it?"

Joyce shook her head. "No, that's the... I was awake. I swear I was. There was this... kid. A boy. Probably Jonathan's age, not sure. He came out of nowhere, I swear. He was not there one second, and the next... he was. He... I tried to ask him how he did it, but he... he got hold of me, and he told me I hadn't seen him. That he wasn't there. And... I started to panic, and he hit my head. Hard. Next thing I knew, I woke up in Veronica's bed with the gown on and the monitors on me and everything."

"Everything?"

"No, not everything. The iv was just lying next to my arm. It was wet. I didn't really pay attention to that. I knew Veronica was gone, tried to get the nurses and..."

"They assumed she was Veronica and sedated her," Jonathan said. "They were going to do it again when Nancy and I got to the hospital."

"Damn," Hop said. "The hell is wrong with people?"

"They hadn't seen Joyce with Veronica," Nancy said. "It's not impossible to believe they could be the same person. Just... they should have listened when she said she wasn't, or at least looked into it some before sedating her."

Joyce took out a cigarette and put it in her mouth, lighting it. "Hop, I know this sounds insane, but this time I was not the one that—"

"You're sure it wasn't the same thing that took Will and Barbara?"

Joyce grimaced. "You know, if it was, I'd actually feel... validated or something, but... it was some kid. It's nuts. I know it is, but I saw him. I did. I saw him. He spoke to me, and I think he took her."

"What did he look like?"

"Um... dark hair, um... his eyes were... intense... and... he had this long dark coat on and... I don't know..." Joyce blew out a breath. "He wasn't local. That much I do know. This many years working in the store, I know everyone, and he doesn't live here."

"Not much to go on."

"Dark coat and hair?" Nancy repeated, and Hop looked over at her. They all did. "It's just... that guy that Veronica made out with in Indianapolis... I didn't get a good look at him, neither of us did, but he did have dark hair and he was wearing a long dark coat. His back was to us when we got in, and he left right away, but... it could have been him."

Hop frowned. "So Veronica's phantom boyfriend somehow got in her hospital room, swapped her for Joyce, and left?"

"It's not impossible," Jonathan said. "She was only on the second floor, and you thought he was stalking her before."

"What?" Nancy asked. "Seriously? Why did no one mention it before?"

"Because we had nothing to go on, just my suspicion that maybe he had something to do with the fire at her house," Hop said. "We considered him as a part of what happened to Will—"

“Veronica said it was a man without a face,” Nancy said. “Was she lying?”

“That was what I thought, but I honestly don't know anymore,” Hop said. “And didn't I hear tell you saw a man in a mask or something at that Harrington kid's house?”

“Yeah, I did. I thought I did,” Nancy said, biting her lip and looking to Jonathan.

Jonathan looked at Joyce. “Mom, is there any way that guy you saw was the same as the thing that came out of the wall?”

She shook her head. “No, but then... Why take Will? Why put her through that? Why take Barb? He did hit me, but I think... I think he was just there for her. And... it's nuts, but Will told me she wasn't alone in the house, that someone did that to her...”

“The boyfriend?”

“I don't know. I just... don't know.”

30. Chapter 30

Summary for the Chapter:

Veronica has a really bad night before she's about to start school.

Each side of the investigation takes a bit of time to figure out what is going on and what to do about it.

Notes for the Chapter:

I swear, these sections keep getting long on me without me intending to do it. Or they would be huge if I hadn't stopped and looked and went, "okay, better break it off here." There's so much in the first season that they did and trying to be faithful to that while making some significant changes means a lot of stuff to cover, even if I am using the scenes almost the way they are and have transcripts to help me.

Also, I finally started in on that night Hop mentioned earlier, about Veronica, and it took a turn on me as I did it.

October 12

He watched, waiting for the house to get dark in the night.

He had to see Veronica, had to talk to her. That was what made it complicated. If he didn't need to talk to her, he could just grab her and go, but if she wanted to be with her family, that made things different. Very different.

He wasn't sure how to fix that, but he could try if she asked him to, so he had to allow her to ask. A part of him didn't want to, said forget them and just take her, but if he did that, was he really any better

than the lab?

He didn't want to be like the lab.

He lit a cigarette, waiting. If he was right, she would see it. She'd come looking to see what it was. He'd already dealt with the man in the yard, having firewalked in right behind him and been able to surprise him with a rock. He didn't know if they would know that meant he was here or if they'd believe he could have tripped.

He wouldn't be able to tell them one way or another.

And he had the man's gun, which was something, he supposed. He took another drag of the cigarette and frowned. She wasn't at her window tonight? How was that possible? She was always at her window.

He would have to try again another night, but he didn't know if he could. If they found this one, they might know he was here, and it was too much of a risk. It had to be tonight. He wouldn't be able to come and go like this again, he already knew that.

He took a step closer, and then he heard it, a scrape of protesting wood. He watched, smiling to himself as he saw her climbing out. She would be here soon enough, and he could tell her about the men watching her, ask her if she wanted to stay, and if she didn't, then they'd go.

He was a little excited, but that died the minute he heard the man's radio spark to life.

"Reynolds, where the hell are you? Report."

He turned back, going to shut it off, but the noise must have gotten to Veronica somehow, because she was now running to where he was. He wanted that, but he didn't. He didn't want her finding the body. He started dragging it away, needing to find a place to hide it for a minute, and he got it behind a tree, leaving it there.

"Hello?" Veronica called out, and he turned to answer her, coming around the tree. She stared at him, and he smiled for her. "I... You..."

Something snapped to the side, and Veronica let out a scream, backing away from another agent, this one with his gun in hand. He swallowed, knowing he had to do something, but he wasn't lighting this one on fire. He might shoot Veronica like that other one had her mother.

He took the gun out of his coat pocket and fired it into the distance. Veronica jumped, but the man turned toward him, and he ran, knowing he had to get the agent away from her. If he led him around, he might even be able to loop him back so he came up on his dead friend and shot him, which would get rid of that problem.

He smiled at the thought and took off deeper into the woods.

Veronica leaned against the trees, shaking. That man had come out of nowhere, and she didn't understand. What was he doing in their yard? She had thought she was imagining that little light in the distance, but she'd chased it anyway.

What the hell? Her life here wasn't getting any better, right?

Only now that man could have killed her. He had definitely been about to before that gunshot, which didn't make any sense because he was fire and why would he have a gun?

Was it not him?

She took another breath, trying to figure out what to do. Go back to the house, that was the obvious choice, but was it actually safe? Would doing that make him follow her? And if he did, would he kill Joyce and Jonathan and Will?

She bit her lip. She couldn't let that happen again. If he killed her, fine. Not anyone else. Not her aunt, who tried so hard to make this work for all of them, or Jonathan, who was doing just as much as she was. Will... he was a bit of a brat, but he'd grow out of it, right? She couldn't do this to them. She wasn't worth it, and she knew that.

She looked back at the other tree, knowing that was the direction that man had gone, and moving toward him was stupid, but she

thought she saw something. She heard a crackle and then a voice spoke.

“Reynolds, where the hell are you? Fields, get your ass over here. I’ve got something.”

She forced herself around the tree and gasped, backing away at the sight of the dead man against the tree. She felt sick, like she was going to puke, and she couldn't really breathe, but that wasn't her pyro. He couldn't have done this. He... just... couldn't have, could he?

She wanted to believe he would just have burned people and if he killed anyone, it was with a good reason, and she didn't know what these men were doing in their yard, but they had guns, so that couldn't be good. She swallowed and moved away from the body, looking at the trees in confusion.

She wasn't that far from the house. She was not lost.

She didn't want to go back to the house, not yet. She forced herself forward out into the trees, deeper into the woods, hoping she wasn't going the same way as the gunshots. She was so confused, and if he was here, why hadn't he said anything to her? He should have said something.

She stepped around a tree and stopped, facing a gun for the second time that night. She shivered.

The man in front of her lifted his radio. “This is Fields. Found the girl. Over.”

“Idiot. She's not supposed to see you. Dose her and get the hell out of there.”

“Copy,” the man said, setting down his radio, his gun still pointed at her. “Don't move. I'm going to make this quick and painless for you.”

She shook her head. “Don't do this.”

He reached into his pocket and took out a syringe. “Sorry, I have to. Don't worry. You'll just go to sleep, and it'll be easy.”

She kept shaking her head as he came closer to her, and she knew if she ran, he'd shoot her, and her body didn't seem to want to move, frozen in place, but she had to do something. Anything. She couldn't let them kill her. He took another step, and she did the only thing she could think of, she went for his gun.

Something sharp stabbed her arm as she struggled with him, a bullet going wide into the tree above her head. She flinched and ducked, ending up on the other side of his arm, feeling a bit dizzy. Her ears rang from the sound of the gun. She couldn't let go, though. He'd shoot her.

Or drug her. Either one was bad enough.

She smacked his hand into the tree, and he swore. She did it again, and his grip on the gun loosened. She did it again, knowing she had to hurry. She was starting to feel worse, and he'd win if she got dizzy again.

“Bitch.”

She got the gun free somehow and pointed it at him. “Get away from me. Now.”

Her words sounded funny, and he just laughed, so she pulled the trigger. The gun jerked in her hands and she stared in disbelief as the bullet hit him and he went down.

She'd killed him. Oh, God. She'd killed him.

November 11

“My aunt.”

Barb grimaced at Veronica's words. It almost would have been a relief if the other girl had gone to sleep again when Jay did, but she hadn't settled in for long. Barb could have made a comment or two about him being a lousy pillow, but she didn't think it was that, more that Veronica was too upset to sleep again even if she might need it.

"I'm sure she'll be okay," Barb said. "They'll realize what he did, and they won't hurt her."

Veronica shook her head, and apparently it was her turn to comb through his hair, like maybe that was soothing her as she tried to stay calm. "If they know he was there, they might."

Barb bit her lip. "So... he's right about them killing everyone who knows about him?"

Veronica closed her eyes, wincing. "I know that's why my parents died. If... If I hadn't... I tried to stop them, but my parents... they accepted the lies that blonde told them, and it... It would have been enough."

Barb nodded. "That's why I'm still here. He's afraid if I go home and tell anyone what happened, they'll come after me and my parents. I've been trying to figure out a story that I can tell people that they'll believe and doesn't involve a strange kid with fire, but it hasn't worked so far."

"Because the obvious one... goes right back to him," Veronica said, looking down at him with pity all over her face. "I... I told them what I saw... that... that thing took you... and... they said... man in a mask... but they already blamed him for Will... and it wasn't him..."

"No, from what I understand, he tried to help Will, too," Barb said. "He was a bit vague and mostly out of it because that place... it hurts him to go there. It's... like a horror movie. Everything's dead or dying and gross. Completely gross."

Veronica swallowed. "I... We have to do something... about my aunt. Even if... they don't try to hurt her... she... they found Will's body and... and..."

Barb winced. "Will's dead?"

"No."

Veronica looked down at Jay. "What? They found a body. In the water. I saw it."

"Not Will," Jay insisted. "Not according to... her."

"My aunt?"

"No. Eleven."

"You know Eleven?" Veronica asked, frowning. "I saw her with Mike, Dustin, and Lucas, but she said... there wasn't a Nine."

He snorted. "You think they want her knowing about us? We're free. They'd hate her knowing that."

"You're free?"

He forced himself up to a sitting position. "Yes. I am. So are you. Now... you want your aunt free."

"I'm worried," Veronica corrected. "I think she could be in danger because you swapped her for me. And I don't want anything to happen to her. She's been good to me, really good. And she doesn't deserve this... None of them do... and if Will is... if they found his body..."

Jay grunted. "Fine. I will go find your aunt and make sure she's safe. You stay here."

"What?"

"They did overdose you with drugs, remember?" Barb asked. "And since we still don't have a story or shoes for me, he's almost the only one of us that can move freely, even if he really shouldn't."

"I thought that hurt you. And you just did it, so—"

"Hawkins is different," he told her. "Doesn't take as big a flame to go in and out. Can do it with one of these."

He held up a cigarette, and Barb had to nod, since she'd seen him vanish not long after lighting one. It was really weird, but she'd forced herself into cleaning up and tried her best not to think about it at all.

"That still doesn't mean you should," Barb reminded him. "You still sound tired, you don't have much food left, and you could get caught by those people."

He nodded. "So wait a day and walk back to town if I don't make it back."

"What?" Veronica demanded. "No. You can't. Don't. You—I can't—"

"You'll have your aunt and Jonathan and Will if I do this," he said, stopping to cup her cheek. "It's worth it. You stay. I go."

"No," Veronica said, but the cigarette lit up and he was gone a second after he stopped touching her.

"What do you suppose they're talking about in there?" Nancy asked, eying the trailer again and trying not to get pissed off about being relegated to the outside. "We already know most of it, right? Is he really going to pretend we don't? That we're babies, too young to handle this?"

"Well, for one thing, I hope he's convincing my mom changing her clothes is worth doing before charging off after my cousin," Jonathan said, and Nancy looked at him. "I can't do it. I've tried, but I swear, she's been in that since Will disappeared. I know, Veronica missing and all, priorities should seem different, but... I don't know. She's just getting worse, and I hate seeing it. I hate knowing there's nothing I can do."

Nancy grimaced. Her mother was always so put together, the perfect suburban trophy wife, and she never had to deal with anything like this. "I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "Besides, I figure she might just be telling him what Veronica told me about her boyfriend, and if she is... well, they think I don't know, and Veronica was really paranoid about it, so they wouldn't risk telling either of us."

Nancy frowned. "What do you mean? Is Veronica's boyfriend really responsible for all this?"

“Not according to her. She swore up and down he wouldn't have hurt Will, wouldn't have taken him. He wouldn't have hurt anyone because she'd have gone with him willingly.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” Nancy agreed, “but if your mom is scared of what she told her and not telling you and you are—”

“She also thought this guy was the key to getting Will back because of what this guy could do.”

Nancy blinked. “What?”

Jonathan drew a breath and let it out. “I know. It sounds crazy, and it is. Or I thought it was. I'm not sure of much anything right now, but... she said he could do stuff. Impossible stuff. So I didn't believe her, but she... she thought he could move between worlds, like... like the monster but not the monster.”

“So it's not really her boyfriend? It's really a thing without a face?”

“I don't know. Hopper thought she was making half of it up because she couldn't accept that he really had done it, this boyfriend of hers. He dropped it in favor of a regular search because he couldn't even get a name out of her, and if he had gotten more... it would have been the story of how he was made in some lab and forced to learn how to control fire with his mind, that he got her parents killed when the lab found him and it was over a hamster.”

“Well, she did mention the hamster before, and it upset her pretty badly,” Nancy said. “I guess... she's consistent?”

“I don't know. It's frustrating because either she's crazy—and it really sounds like it, but then we have that picture and Mom saw something and Will might even have talked to her—or she's lying, and it doesn't help us. At all.”

Nancy nodded. She didn't know how any of this could help them. “Do you think your mom is right and he was there? Or... if Veronica was really sure he could help, if he's even real—or maybe it doesn't matter if he is because she believes it—then wouldn't she just have taken off herself? Gone to find him? And she could have switched

places with your mom to buy herself some time.”

“Maybe. I could see her being a part of it, and if this guy did come for her, she'd have gone with him. That much I am sure of. I don't know about the rest of it.”

“So...” Nancy bit her lip. “What does this mean for Barb? That Veronica willingly went off with her kidnapper? Maybe her killer?”

Jonathan shrugged, his hands in his pocket. “I don't know. I guess if that's the case, finding her could solve everything. Except...”

“Except?”

He pointed to her bag. “That thing in the pictures. It's tall and thin. It's not wearing any clothes. What Mom saw and what you saw... it's the same thing, so at least that part of Veronica's story is probably true. I'm not sure about the fire thing or the other worlds part, but there was something or someone in the house that night. Maybe more than one someone, since she said she was drugged before Will was taken.”

“What?”

He winced. “Um... I guess I left out the part about how the people in the lab that made him are willing to kill everyone who knows about him to keep it quiet. That's why her parents are dead. She's only alive because they're using her as bait. For him.”

Nancy frowned. “Okay. So... why did they drug her?”

“So she'd look crazy?”

“And if Will did tell your mom someone was in the house...” Nancy rubbed her forehead. “Could it have been these people, using her as bait at the hospital or something?”

Jonathan walked away from his car, starting to pace. “I've been trying not to think too much about the part with Veronica because it doesn't make sense. What I have been thinking... Here. This is where we know for sure it's been, right?”

She looked at the paper he'd taken out, the three marks he'd made, and she waited, needing more than that. "So, that's—"

"Steve's house," Jonathan said, pointing to the first x. "And that's the woods where they found Will's bike and that's my house."

Nancy looked over the small area on the map. "It's all so close."

"Yeah. Exactly," Jonathan said, a bit excited by her grasp of his discovery. "I mean, it's all within a mile or something. Whatever this thing is, it's not traveling far."

"Unless it went to the hospital."

He shook his head. "I'm not so sure it did. I think we might even be able to prove it."

She understood, and it both scared her and made a slight thrill go through her. She could do something to find Barb, really do something. "You want to go out there."

He grimaced. "We might not find anything."

She thought about her trip to Steve's house. "I found something."

"And if we do see it, then what?"

"We kill it."

"I wasn't sure about taking this inside," Hop admitted, and Joyce looked around at the destruction all over the trailer. She'd thought what she did to the wall was insane, but this was so much worse. She didn't understand. Was Hop this upset about Will? Oh, sure, had things been different, maybe both boys would be his, not Lonnie's, but they weren't. Even Veronica, what happened to her, that wasn't his fault. Joyce was so much more to blame for that than he was. "Should be okay, I mean I can't guarantee it, but it should be okay."

"What the hell is going on, Hopper?" Joyce asked, gesturing to the devastation.

“They bugged my place.”

“What?”

“They bugged my place,” he repeated. “They put a microphone in the light. It’s because I’m on to them and they know it.”

She tensed. Oh, God. This wasn’t happening, was it? Was it really happening?

“I thought they might be watching you, too.”

Like Veronica had said. “Who?”

“I don’t know, the CIA, the NSA, Department of Energy—I don’t know.”

“Is this about what Veronica said about the house being bugged?” Joyce asked. “Are you actually thinking she was right about that now? You gotta explain this to me, ‘cause I am not—”

“I went to the morgue last night, Joyce.”

“What?”

“It wasn’t him.”

“What?”

“Will’s body, it was a fake,” Hop told her, taking her arm. “You were right. This whole time, you were right.”

She breathed a sigh of relief, though she couldn’t stay relieved for long. Proof that Will was alive just meant that he was still out there, being hunted, and she had no way to get to him. She bit her lip, and Hop pulled her into his arms.

“We’re going to find him,” Hop told her. “I promise. And we’ll find Veronica, too. I just... I wanted to tell you about the body first. Before anything else. Before I get into the really weird shit I saw when I went into that lab.”

Joyce swallowed. "The lab?"

"Hawkins Lab, yeah," he said, letting her go and looking at her. "The other night, during the search, someone found a scrap of fabric on a drain pipe near the lab. We went there, they showed me security footage of the pipe, but there was no rain. I knew they were lying, didn't know why. Then I looked up the lab, found a bunch of articles on experiments the doctor in charge ran, even a lady who thought this guy stole her kid. All of that I found before Will's body turned up. And I thought I was just being paranoid, but then Gary didn't do the autopsy, that trooper O'Bannon was ordered to the site and to keep people away from the body, so I went to the morgue. Then I went to the lab."

She stared at him. "How are you even alive, Hop?"

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean... Veronica said the people at the lab killed to protect their secrets. That they'd killed her parents because they knew too much. That they'd drugged her."

"I don't feel right about this."

Normally, that line would be coming from Dustin, and it would be almost easy to ignore. If there was one thing they could count on from Dustin, it was a classic *I've got a bad feeling about this*. Only this time, the doubt was coming from Mike. And Lucas had a feeling that he knew what was coming next.

"We shouldn't have left El behind."

"Like we could risk bringing her back to school again. We could be in real trouble ourselves," Lucas reminded him. "The Hamshack caught on fire, remember? And we were the ones with the keys and everything. We'll be lucky if Mr. Clarke doesn't throw us out on the spot."

Mike winced, and Dustin looked worse. Lucas regretted saying it, but he so did not want the weirdo along. They were pushing things as it

was, since he was pretty sure that their teacher wouldn't be thrilled about them cutting class today, even if Will was supposedly dead.

"We need to talk to Mr. Clarke one way or another," Lucas said, knowing they wouldn't get much help from anyone else. It was either Mr. Clarke or Veronica, and Mike kept insisting that there was no Nine because Eleven told him there wasn't one.

Lucas was starting to think Mike would believe anything that girl said, and it was more than a little annoying. She might know things, but she wasn't the only one that did, and frankly, Lucas almost thought he'd rather talk to the vampire than the weirdo.

"Let's just get this over with," Mike said, pushing the door open to go inside Mr. Clarke's classroom. "Mr. Clarke?"

"Oh, hey there, boys," Mr. Clarke said. "How are you holding up?"

"We're in mourning," Lucas said, aware of how awkward he sounded but knowing they needed to say something to explain why they'd cut class.

"We were wondering if you had time to talk?" Mike began. "We have some questions."

"A lot of questions," Lucas said, and Mr. Clarke gave them a sad sort of smile.

"So, you know how in *Cosmos*, Carl Sagan talks about other dimensions? Like, beyond our world?"

"Yeah, sure," Mr. Clarke agreed, his smile more genuine now, as it got when he was going into science mode. "Theoretically."

"Right, theoretically," Mike agreed. "So, theoretically, how do we travel there?"

"You guys have been thinking about Hugh Everett's Many Worlds Interpretation, haven't you?" Mr. Clarke asked. Lucas knew none of them would dare admit that they didn't know what he was talking about. "Well, basically, there are parallel universes. Just like our world, but just infinite variations of it. Which means there's a world

out there where none of this tragic stuff ever happened.”

“Yeah, that's not what we're talking about,” Lucas said. Will wasn't dead, just stuck, and while it was messed up his cousin tried to kill herself, she probably wouldn't have if she knew what they did.

“Oh.”

“We were thinking of more of an evil dimension,” Dustin explained, “like the Vale of Shadows. You know the Vale of Shadows?”

Mr. Clarke nodded. “An echo of the Material Plane, where necrotic and shadow magic prevail.”

It was kind of cool knowing Mr. Clarke played Dungeons and Dragons, too. Maybe they could do it with him sometime.

“Yeah, exactly,” Mike said. “If that did exist, a place like the Vale of Shadows, how would we travel there?”

“Theoretically,” Lucas added. They weren't going to convince any of the adults that this was real. Maybe not even Veronica, for all she'd said something about Nine being able to get to Will.

“Well,” Mr. Clarke began, taking a piece of paper and drawing on it. “Picture an acrobat standing on a tightrope. Now, the tightrope is our dimension. And our dimension has rules. You can move forwards or backwards. But, what if right next to our acrobat, there is a flea? Now, the flea can also travel back and forth, just like the acrobat. Right?”

“Right,” they all agreed.

“Here's where things get really interesting,” Mr. Clarke said. “The flea can also travel this way along the side of the rope. He can even go underneath the rope.”

“Upside down.”

Mr. Clarke nodded. “Exactly.”

“But we're not the flea,” Mike said. “We're the acrobat.”

"In this metaphor, yes," Mr. Clarke agreed. "We're the acrobat."

"So we can't go upside down?"

"No."

Great. So much for saving Will.

"Well, is there any way for the acrobat to get to the Upside Down?" Mike asked, sounding a bit desperate.

"Or any way a human could act like the flea?" Dustin asked, and Mike gave him a look. "What? There's still a possibility of a fire mage."

Mr. Clarke gave them a smile like he was humoring them after that one, and Lucas almost smacked Dustin for saying it. "Well, you'd have to create a massive amount of energy. More than humans are currently capable of creating, mind you, to open up some kind of tear in time and space, and then you create a doorway."

"Like a gate?"

"Sure," Mr. Clarke said. "Like a gate. But again, this is all—"

"Theoretical," Mike finished. "But but what if this gate already existed?"

"Well, if it did, I think we'd know," Mr. Clarke told them. "It would disrupt gravity, the magnetic field, our environment. Heck, it might even swallow us up whole. Science is neat. But I'm afraid it's not very forgiving."

"Joyce, what are you talking about?" Hop asked, frowning at her. "How long have you known about the lab?"

She sighed. "Veronica told me the day we discovered Will was missing, but I... I thought if I told anyone what she said, she'd look completely insane, and I couldn't do that to her. I didn't know if I believed her, but I didn't think anyone else would. She was so messed up by her parents dying, and she'd just told us that some thing

without a face had taken Will and that right before it happened, she'd been drugged. Now I know that she's not crazy, but I think a lot of people would have thought she was. Hell, they think I am. Now they think they even have proof because Jonathan and I fought about that fake body in the street."

Hop grimaced. That was not going to help matters any, that was for damned sure. They did all already think Joyce had lost it, but that didn't make them right. He knew Will's body was a fake, but he had no idea how he was going to prove it now. He should be dead, she was right about that much, and he wasn't sure why they'd left him alive.

Except... he knew they'd drugged him, maybe to confuse him, make him think he drank too much and dreamed up that mess, but he knew he hadn't.

"Tell me what she told you. All of it."

Joyce took out a cigarette, lighting it up. "She said he came to her to give her a hamster because he had to run. They'd killed the man claiming to be his father. She convinced him to stay overnight, said they only kissed, and that the next day, people showed up at her house claiming he'd killed his 'father' and set his house on fire. That was the story they told her parents, which Marion and her husband apparently believed. They were going to make her leave the house with them, so she went to say goodbye, but her parents followed, found him in the room, and soldiers stormed the house. He tried to leave out her window, but she stood in front of him to defend him, and they shot him, almost shooting her. Marion's husband got upset, so they shot him in the head. And then... they were going to kill Marion and Veronica, so the boy lit the men on fire and one of them started shooting. He killed Marion. The boy set fire to the house and got Veronica out, where she was caught in her yard and drugged by that woman she told us about, the one who was a nurse in Sherwood and a social worker and drugged her here. They kept her alive as bait for this boy."

Hop frowned. Part of that tallied as there was no way those burns came from a house fire and it hadn't been a gas main. "And you saw fit to keep this from me?"

“Veronica was really upset, made me promise not to tell anyone, and it sounded a little crazy. Because... she said he'd been experimented on, and that... the part about setting all the soldiers on fire at the same time but not burning the house? It doesn't make sense. It was a pretty messed up story, Hop. And no one can do that, right? She said... they made him fire. I thought maybe she was just desperate to tell me something, anything that would convince me it wasn't her boyfriend, and she insisted not only that he wouldn't have hurt anyone to get to her... but that these people who'd experimented on him, they'd kill all of us if she told us or I told anyone else. And since it was so damned crazy...”

Hop nodded. He could see that. “Okay, so the lab did this. She never said which lab?”

Joyce shook her head. “I never pushed her for more details. There was that weird phone call and then the lights and I was caught up in trying to communicate with Will. I didn't know she'd gone to that party where she saw Barb get taken, and I didn't... that night when they found that thing in the quarry, I didn't know she was out to do that.”

Hop knew others would take issues with Joyce's parenting, but they weren't living her life right now, which was a complete nightmare. He'd done this, losing Sara, but he lost his little girl to a disease. It was straight-forward, not a damned conspiracy full of monsters and death.

“I need to tell you what I saw in that lab,” he said, and she nodded. He was starting to get a sick feeling about all this, not that he didn't have one before, but if what Veronica had told Joyce was true, if that boy had been a part of some messed up crap over at Hawkins—which wasn't impossible, he'd seen a room there that was clearly a child's—then they were in some real trouble because that lab was not going to let them live when this was all said and done.

“We need to find Veronica, Hop. If that boy was her boyfriend, if he's that same one... Veronica said that he could get to where Will is. We need him.”

“Unless she lied and he killed her parents, Will, and that girl

Barbara.”

Joyce sighed. “You said that you saw something in the lab. What was it?”

31. Chapter 31

Summary for the Chapter:

The night continues.

The plans to find Will, Barbara, and Veronica are still in the discussion stage.

Notes for the Chapter:

I tried really hard to work on this yesterday, but my brain was dead after work and only barely functioned enough to do a maybe humorous (in a warped way) one-shot and so I didn't get it done. The stuff I had planned for the night Veronica sort of disappears/has an incident while living with the Byers was rather epic in my head... and rather hard to execute even when my brain was more functional, and in the end, it's not the same but perhaps is more realistic (and yet less so?) this way.

And things were also complicated by this thing that Nine has where he wants to show up at all these canon points in season one and be a complete jerk... which does not make choosing a path easy as his lines are hilarious but definitely over the top.

October 12

He heard the shot and almost panicked enough to burn down the entire woods.

Veronica was in trouble. He had to get to her. Now. He ran toward the sound of it, forgetting about his plan to make it look like his dead guard had been killed by the one he'd been leading on a chase. He had to find her and make sure she wasn't hurt.

If they hurt her, he was going to burn the whole damned forest down and the lab after it. He didn't care anymore. Not if he lost her.

He tripped over something and swore, looking at the root only to discover it was a body. A man's, in a suit. His shirt looked stained, and when he lit a flame in his hand to check it, it was definitely blood. This one had been shot.

He enlarged the flame and looked over to see Veronica sprawled on the ground. The gun was near her hand, and he winced to know she'd been the one to kill him. He should have done that. She wasn't like him, a damaged freak made in a lab. She was good, not a killer.

He was. He went over to her, checking to make sure she was breathing, and she was, but really slow like she was in a deep, deep sleep. He knew that kind of sleep. That sleep was the kind that came with drugs.

He turned back to see a syringe on the ground. So they'd drugged her, but she'd still fought and got the gun. Good girl. He was proud of her, even if he hadn't wanted her to be like him.

He took a breath, hating himself for moving away from her. She was just asleep, still breathing, and he knew there was another man out here, one that could still hurt her. He had to find that one and make sure he didn't do anything to hurt her.

She had killed one of them, and they might not think it was worth keeping her alive as bait if they knew she'd killed him. He couldn't let them hurt her.

He could just take her, he knew that, and maybe he should. He had wanted to ask her if she wanted to stay with her family, and he knew that they could still get hurt if he took her away. She'd be safe. They could be dead.

She might not care. He didn't know that he did. Did he?

He grimaced. He shouldn't care. They were strangers. They were keeping him from Veronica, and he should just take her.

Only... he was afraid she wouldn't want that, and if she woke up and

found he had, she could hate him forever. What would he do then? He'd lose her all over again, and if she did run or something, she could even call the lab and turn him over to them.

She wouldn't do that.

Well, she could. If he killed her family again. Not that he'd shot her parents, but he had gotten them killed. He shook his head, forcing himself forward. He needed to find that other body. He circled back around to the other tree, looking at the body of Reynolds and frowning.

"Where the hell is everyone?" the other man demanded. "Damn it, Reynolds."

He listened, waiting for the man to get closer. He had to do this right or it wouldn't seem believable, and he couldn't let the lab know he was here. He couldn't risk them coming after everyone because of him. If they could prove he'd been here, no one in Veronica's house would be safe, not even the boy.

"Reynolds?"

He fired the gun at the shadow in front of him, hearing the man swear and return fire before making a loud thump as he went down. That was enough, he thought, though he had to get the gun into the dead man's hand. He wiped it off with his coat, put it in Reynolds' hand and stepped back to the trees. He had to do something about the man Veronica had shot.

He went back to her side, checking her again to make sure she was still breathing. He brushed back her hair and sighed.

"This got all fucked up, you know? It wasn't supposed to be like this."

She didn't respond, but he didn't expect her to. He turned back to Fields, grabbing his body and lifting it up, dragging it with him over to the other two, making it look like Fields had been with the other man when Reynolds shot them.

He didn't figure this would work, but he could confuse the issue a little more, maybe even get rid of the blood trail if he could hold it

for a while. He went back to Veronica, holding her in his arms as he worked, closing his eyes and using his control over fire to shift the pressure of the air around them until the rain started. He leaned back against the tree with a groan, hurting like hell after that one.

No one would think of a kid controlling fire bringing down rain, right? But he'd watched a television special on the weather and wanted to try it before, when he was with Bud, and when it paid off and he could do it, Bud had given him Slushie, so it was worth the pain it took then. He hoped it was worth it now, though it would be hard to tell as he wasn't sure what the range of it was and a freak storm would still get some attention.

Still, if they thought this all happened because a few idiots got trigger happy in the rain, he might just have saved Veronica. He didn't know.

Thunder boomed so loud it seemed to shake the house, jarring Joyce out of her awkward slumber on the couch, waking her as much as panicking her. She swallowed, trying to calm herself down as she looked around the house. The living room was dark, but she could see lightning brightening the sky through the windows.

Shivering, she walked down the hall, following her usual nightly ritual and checking on the kids before she turned in herself. Even at her most exhausted she tried not to skip it, needed that step to tell herself that she wasn't that terrible a mother. She pushed Jonathan's door open a small crack and smiled to herself as she saw both her boys. Will had fallen asleep with his comic book on his chest, and Jonathan had his headphones on, but they both looked peaceful despite the storm.

She closed the door behind her again and crossed over to the other door, pushing it open and stopping dead as another lightning bolt lit up the room. Veronica's bed was empty. Her window was open. Joyce rushed over and looked out it, frowning. She glanced at the floor, seeing water pooled up there.

How long had the window been open? All night? Where was Veronica?

She turned back, biting her lip as she went to check the other rooms. No one in the bathroom or kitchen or even her room. She stopped back in the hall, trying to decide what to do and went for the front door first. She opened it, stepping out onto the porch, the chill sending a shiver through her again as she looked around their driveway. Both her car and Jonathan's were sitting there, so Veronica hadn't taken them. No one had called, so it wasn't like Joyce thought Veronica had gotten a ride from someone.

Where would she go? It was pouring out there, and this made no sense.

Joyce went to the back door, opening it and looking out. She didn't see anything or anyone, but Veronica wasn't in the house. She hadn't taken a car. She must be out there somewhere, out in the woods. If it was Will, she might have thought maybe he'd gone to Castle Byers, as crazy as that was in this kind of weather, but Veronica didn't have that kind of a place.

Joyce grabbed her coat and a flashlight, going out into the night. "Veronica?"

She didn't get an answer, not other than Chester's frantic barking, tugging at his rope like he wanted to run into the woods if he only had a chance. Joyce winced, hoping maybe he was wrong about it and going to the door to the shed, opening it and shining the light inside.

No one. Again.

She was starting to feel sick.

"Veronica? Veronica, sweetheart, where are you? Answer me, please."

Chester barked again, and she swallowed, going over to his house and untying his rope. She didn't want to go find his leash.

"Where is she? Can you help me find her? Please?"

Chester tugged on the rope, almost dragging her off into the woods.

“Second team, any sign of advance?”

“Negative, base. Nothing yet, just a lot of damned rain.”

He jerked awake when the radio went off, listening to them for a bit longer as he tried to get feeling back in his body. He grimaced, trying to move only to discover he was still buried under Veronica. She was kind of heavy when she was sleeping, or maybe he was just sore.

He kissed her forehead anyway, wanting to have that moment even if he knew he had to move. He forced himself out from under her, not sure what the hell they'd given her—must be damned strong if she was still out, though he really wasn't sure how long he'd been out himself. Most of what he could do was easier here in Hawkins because of the lab, but manipulating the weather had almost killed him the first time, and this one wasn't much better.

Some, not much.

He wasn't sure he was up to lighting a cigarette at the moment, even if it wasn't raining, but that radio was far from a good sign. More were coming, and if they found Veronica...

He shook his head, knowing he had to get them away from here. The sheds were safe enough, right? He'd spent nights there before. He could do it again, since he knew he couldn't go into the house, not unless he was firewalking.

He couldn't do that now. He wasn't up to it, and he could tell. He wanted to fall back asleep, and he could eat twice his weight again.

“We have to go,” he told Veronica. “Need you... up...”

She didn't move, not sure how he was going to wake her because he could barely move himself, could not carry her, not far.

“Come on,” he said as he pulled her a bit, aware he was dragging her and hoping it wasn't doing any damage. “Need to get away from them.”

He stopped, shifting her so she was in a better position, and kept going, needing to move them far from those men. Somewhere out

here that boy had a hut of some kind, and if he could find that, he could probably rest for a bit. Then he could do the firewalk and not kill them. He'd get them both away from here, and it would be fine.

Well, other than her maybe being mad at him for taking her and the whole killing thing. She'd killed someone. If she was lucky, she'd wake up and wouldn't remember it.

She was too good to live with that.

He wasn't. He was a monster, a killer. And he knew that. He hadn't saved anyone tonight.

He was a fool to even try.

November 11

"Killing it is crazy. We can't do that."

"What, you want to take another photograph of it? Even with one, we don't know that they'll believe us, and it's pretty clear they're keeping something from us right now," Jonathan said, gesturing to Hopper's house in frustration. "Look, I know it's not the safest plan or the smartest, but even if all we did was find some sign of where it has been... I don't know. I just know that if Mom and Hopper decide Veronica's boyfriend did this, they'll stop looking for this thing. And you saw it, not him."

Nancy grimaced. "I know, but... what if we can't fight it? What if... there's no sign of it? What if I was wrong?"

He looked at her. She could be, but he figured there were enough accounts of the thing to assume it was, in fact, real. "Isn't it better to know?"

"Okay, so say we find it," Nancy said. "How do we... um... kill it? We don't have any weapons."

He had to give her that. The closest thing he had to a weapon right now was the tire iron in the back of his car, and he doubted that

would help them much. "Okay, so we need to find a way to kill it. Um... I think my dad's old hunting rifle is at my house in the shed. I'll have to look."

"I might have something I can use at my house," Nancy said, thinking. "Shouldn't we at least tell them what we're thinking of doing, though? Give them a chance to prove us wrong about shutting us out and not looking for the possible monster?"

Jonathan knew they should. If they left now, before his mom or Hopper came back to tell them what, if anything, to do, all they'd do was push his mom over the edge. Will could be dead, if that body was real. Yesterday morning he'd thought it was, but now... He didn't know. And Veronica was missing, which complicated everything because it wasn't just a monster they had to find. The sane explanation was that this boyfriend of Veronica's had taken Will and Barbara, and why was Jonathan fighting for the crazy one that said it was some *thing* not some *person* who'd done it?

"Yeah, I guess. I'm... I just need to do something, you know? Sitting around waiting isn't enough."

Nancy nodded. "I know. That's why I went looking for Barb, why I tracked you down about the picture even though you were buying a coffin for your brother. Talk about inappropriate timing."

"It might not be Will," Jonathan said, looking at his feet. "Mom could be right. And if Will's alive, then Barb could be, too. That was what we said yesterday."

"I'm not saying I don't... I can't change my mind, not until I know for sure. I'd have to have Barb's body and then... I don't know," Nancy admitted. "I might have as hard a time accepting it as your mom, but then she could be right about all of it."

"Yeah."

Nancy shifted her feet. "We need a real plan besides going out there and hoping to kill it. And if they are going looking for it, then... maybe we need to find Veronica's boyfriend. Which... Do you know anyone from her life before here?"

“Um,” Jonathan thought about it for a second.

“Those Heathers girls she mentioned, maybe?”

Jonathan shook his head. “I doubt they'd tell us much from what Veronica told me. She had some kind of fight with them before she came here, and they weren't that close. The better option would be that other girl.”

“Other girl?”

“Betty, I think her name was,” Jonathan said. “She mentioned her in one of those Christmas cards she sent us before she came—she gave both me and Will five dollars and an apology for not knowing what to send besides money—and said something about how Betty would have said it was the thought that counted. She lost touch with her, too, but she said Betty was a real friend before, not like the Heathers.”

“Could we find her number, maybe?”

“Maybe. I'm not sure how much good it would do, but we can try it.”

Nancy nodded. “And we can still go after the monster if it doesn't help.”

“Right. We just need to find out what Mom and Hopper are going to do.”

Eleven listened as Mike explained what their teacher had told them, jumping back when he pushed a pen through the paper and startled her. She grimaced, knowing that they weren't wrong but they were also *right*, and that was what was so dangerous.

They wanted to go to the Upside Down. To the rift, the one in the lab, and if they went close to the lab, then Papa or that lady could hurt them. No, Papa rarely did the hurting himself, but he didn't stop anyone. He let them, encouraged them, and that pain with his disappointment was worse.

The bad men would kill Mike. Her friends.

"It would take a lot of energy to build a gate like this," Mike said, sounding excited because he didn't understand at all. "But that's got to be what happened. "Otherwise, how'd Will get there, right?"

She swallowed. "Right."

"What we want to know is, do you know where the gate is?" Lucas asked, and she shook her head, knowing she was lying. She didn't think it was a gate, not like she'd seen defined in the words Papa made her learn, but it does go between this world and that one, so it wasn't just a lie, either. "Then how do you know about the Upside Down?"

She didn't have an answer. She couldn't explain it without telling them everything, and she wasn't going to say anything. She couldn't. They'd hate her for what she'd done.

"Dustin, what are you doing?" Mike asked, frowning at their friend pacing the other side of the room. "Dustin?"

"Dustin," Lucas snapped, and he finally looked back at them.

"I need to see your compasses," Dustin said, looking up at them from the thing in his hand.

"What?"

"Your compasses," Dustin demanded. "All of your compasses, right now."

The others didn't seem to understand, and Eleven didn't, either. She was worried. Everything they did kept pushing them more towards the bad men and being hurt or killed. She didn't want that. She wanted to keep her friends safe.

They put the compasses on the table, on top of the board. Dustin smiled in triumph.

"What's exciting about this?"

Dustin was definitely excited. "Well, they're all facing north, right?"

Mike frowned. "Yeah, so?"

"Well, that's not true north."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean exactly what I just said," Dustin said. "That's not true north."

The other boys just stared at him. Eleven really didn't know what he meant. Did he know she was lying? How could he?

"Are you both seriously this dense?" Dustin asked, frustrated. "The sun rises in the east, and it sets in the west. Right? Which means that's true north."

Mike eyed the table. "So what you're saying is the compasses are broken."

Dustin sighed. "Do you even understand how a compass works? Do you see a battery pack on this?"

"No."

"No, you don't," Dustin said. "Because it doesn't need one. The needle's naturally drawn to the Earth's magnetic North Pole."

"So what's wrong with them?"

"Well, that's what I couldn't figure out, but then I remembered," Dustin's voice regained its excitement he'd had before. "You can change the direction of a compass with a magnet. If there's the presence of a more powerful magnetic field, the needle deflects to that power. And then I remembered what Mr. Clarke said."

"The gate would have so much power. It could disrupt the electromagnetic field."

"Exactly."

"Meaning, if we follow the compasses' north—"

"They should lead us to the gate."

"If the gate exists," Lucas said. They frowned at him. "We don't know that it does. We just have a theory. And it's not our *only* theory. If this other guy exists, who's to say he didn't just grab Will and take him there?"

"Aren't you the one who would want the scientific explanation?" Mike asked, frowning.

"I'm the one who wants the *logical* explanation, and logic says there's more than one way this could have gone down, okay? And no, I'm not just going to ignore the possibility of this other kid being able to do freaky shit because we've already seen it from her. It's not so unthinkable that there are others. And, yeah, the source is the vampire, but not just her. Will said it, too—"

"You said he was panicking," Mike said. "Now he's right about a fire mage?"

Eleven saw Lucas look at her before answering.

"I'm saying possibilities," Lucas said. "Since when are you so willing to ignore them? Or is it just because you'll believe anything she says?"

Mike frowned. "What?"

"Eleven says there's no Nine, so we completely ignore the fire mage angle," Dustin said. "Not that I don't think we've got a more solid plan in the compasses, but Lucas is right, Mike. It's not like you to dismiss an idea like that. You're always looking for something more. That's why you're convinced Will's alive, right? So why not a fire mage? It doesn't even have to be Nine."

Eleven watched them, a strange feeling settling over her. She had lied. Nine was real. She'd found him with her mind, warned him about Veronica and told him Will was still alive, but he'd also shut her out in a way she'd never known before as soon as she did.

"Compasses first," Mike said. "If that doesn't work, we find us a fire mage."

"Look, we gotta go through this again," Joyce said, and Hop tried not to get frustrated with her. He knew what he'd found, what he'd seen, was a bit hard to take in. He was having trouble with it himself, but he also knew they didn't have time for this. Jonathan and the Wheeler girl were outside, waiting, there were at least three missing kids at this point, and they could not afford to rehash every single detail of his visit to the Twilight Zone that was Hawkins Lab.

"I told you everything that I saw," Hop said. They had to let that go and start forming some kind of plan. He was calmer now himself, if slightly irritated, and he had a few thoughts about where to go from here, but that got complicated by the people he knew would want to be involved—not just Joyce but also her son and Nancy.

"Tell me again," Joyce insisted, sounding almost desperate.

"Upstairs or downstairs?"

"Upstairs."

"There was a laboratory. It was where they must do experiments or something, and then there was," Hop took a deep breath. "There was this kid's room."

Joyce frowned. "How do you know it was a kid's room?"

"More like a prison."

She winced. "So why would you think it was a kid's room, then?"

"Because, I told you, the size of the bed, there was a drawing, there was a stuffed animal—"

"You didn't say there was a drawing," Joyce said, and he had to stop and think, replay the moment to be sure he'd somehow missed that. He couldn't be sure anymore.

"Yeah, there was a drawing of an adult and a child. There were... either there were just two marks or it said 'Eleven' on it."

"Was it good?"

Hop sighed, not sure why she was stuck on this. "It was a kid's drawing, Joyce. It was stick figures."

She bit her lip, taking out a folded paper from her pocket. "I... I was carrying this around me. One of those things... it made me feel closer to him. His fireballs looked like cabbages. It was stupid, but... it was his, and I needed a part of him with me."

Hop took the drawing from her, thinking Will just might be growing into an artist, like his brother was a photographer. Maybe. This was far too detailed, though. "No, this is... this is a lot better than what I saw."

Joyce nodded, folding the paper back up. "Wasn't Will, then."

He shook his head. It wasn't. Not Will, but there was another kid involved somewhere. "Earl—The night that Benny died, Earl said he saw some kid with a shaved head with Benny. Now, I pressed him, he said it might be Will, but maybe—"

"Why would Will have a shaved head?"

"Maybe, it wasn't him," Hop said. "Look this woman, Terry Ives, she claims to have lost her daughter, Jane. She sued Brenner, she sued the government Now, the claims came to nothing, but what if... I mean, what if this whole time I've been I've been looking for Will I've been chasing after some other kid?"

Joyce frowned. "You think this other kid is Veronica's boyfriend?"

Hop shook his head. "No. He'd be too old for that if he's seventeen. I mean, sure, kid could have a bit of stunted growth somehow, be short for his age, but I think if he'd had a shaved head, Nancy would have mentioned it. You would have seen it, and there's no way he grew his hair out that fast."

"No, no, you're right," Joyce agreed. "He had hair."

"But there's still a chance that this Terry Ives knows more about this thing than we do. She could have information on Brenner we can use or maybe even on this other boy. I don't know. She's been chasing this longer than us, at least."

Joyce nodded. "You think that's where we should go? To Terry Ives? What about Veronica and Barb and Will?"

"Getting into the lab again could be tricky, and we need to know what we're looking for," Hop said. He lit another cigarette as he paced, thinking, trying to find a way to fix this mess that would not end in all of them dead because he honestly didn't know why he was even still alive. "Now we know—strongly suspect—that this boyfriend of Veronica's took her. And if what he told her was true about this lab and what he can do... then he's as much a threat to them as we are now, knowing what we do."

"Hop, she said they'd kill us for knowing. That they killed her parents to cover up this boy's existence."

"In which case we need to act like we don't believe this kid really exists," Hop said. "For now, at least. We're going to have to find him, but at this point, we don't even have a name. We give out a description, we let the lab know we know. So we need a way to find this kid that isn't going to bring them down on us. And if what we think we know of him is right, we don't want to go in blind or lead them to him because someone's going to get hurt, and we don't want that to be your niece."

"Again."

Hop grimaced, though Joyce was right. Veronica had been hurt plenty because of this kid. "Right. We need to send Jonathan and Nancy home, and then we're going to find this boyfriend."

"What's going on?" Jonathan asked as soon as they walked outside, and Joyce winced, knowing it wasn't right to keep everything from him, but if Veronica was right and that lab would kill anyone who knew about the boyfriend, and from what Hop saw it didn't seem impossible, Joyce didn't want him being any more involved than he already was.

"We were discussing how we might find Veronica's boyfriend," Hop said. "And a few other things."

"You're not going with your deputies?" Nancy asked, frowning. "Why not?"

"I'd like to keep as few people involved in this as possible," Hop said. "Not that we're not going to look for Veronica, but if this kid is as dangerous as we think he is—arsonist, kidnapper, possible killer—then we don't want anyone walking into that blind."

"But they're cops."

"Rural cops," Hop said. "The only thing they've ever shot was when they were hunting, and the kind of shit that's going on around here is way out of their league."

"Which is why you want to send us home, too," Jonathan said, not sounding happy about it. "So I suppose if I told you I thought of a way to get a name for this guy you'd just tell me to give it to you and go."

"Pretty much, yeah."

Joyce winced. "Hop, I know—"

"This is insanely dangerous. Three kids are missing. Will, Barbara, and Veronica. I don't want anyone else hurt."

Jonathan looked at Nancy. She shrugged. "Veronica had a friend back in Sherwood she mentioned more than once that might know something. Betty."

"That's right," Joyce said. "Betty Finn. They were close before. Veronica said they weren't now, though."

"She'd still know about the boyfriend, though, right?" Nancy said. "I think I'd know if it were Barb in that situation, and she definitely worried about me with Steve."

Hop snorted, and Nancy frowned. "You know how many times I've busted up parties involving Harrington or his friends?"

"So not important right now," Nancy muttered. "The point is that Betty probably knows who Veronica was dating. If not her, one of the

Heathers, though they'd be less willing to talk. Veronica did something to make Heather Chandler mad, I guess, and she controlled the other two, so..."

"Other two?"

"There were three Heathers, Hop. It really doesn't matter if we can get the information from Betty," Joyce said. She turned to her son. "Please, just... stay safe for me. I don't... I can't lose you. I know... I know it seems like you take care of me more than I do you, but that's not the only reason... You are my son, and I... I can't. Okay? I just can't, not after Will and Veronica but even if you were the only one —"

"I know, Mom," Jonathan said, pulling her into his arms.

Nancy watched as Hopper's truck drove out of the driveway, trying to contain her fury until they were all the way out of sight. She didn't like being treated like a child. She knew she wasn't always the most responsible of person, but she wasn't stupid.

"I can't believe this."

"I can," Jonathan said. She frowned at him, and he shrugged. "I mean, I get where my mom is coming from. She's really worried about me and figures this keeps me safe when Will and Veronica are missing. She just doesn't understand that I'm just as worried about her. I know that's why Hopper took her with him, to keep her from doing anything crazy or dangerous, but it still stings a little."

"You are way too accepting of this."

Jonathan snorted. "So, what, I'm supposed to get mad and rage against everything that's wrong in my life? What's the point in that? My dad's an asshole, we never had enough money, even with me working because you know my dad never did much to support us, and now my brother is missing, maybe dead. My cousin is missing, maybe dead. My mom is half-insane, and you know what? So am I. What the hell good does it do, getting angry about it? It doesn't help. I can do things to make it better, or I can sit and piss and moan,

blame everyone else for what's wrong, but that's what my dad does and I am *nothing* like him.”

Nancy winced, feeling a bit ashamed of herself. She swallowed. “Um... I just... I'm frustrated.”

“Yeah, well, we didn't even ask them about the monster or show the pictures, but that probably would have made it worse.”

She looked at him. “You still want to go after it?”

He nodded. “I do. If that thing took Will or Barbara, I want to find it. I want to stop it. And if it isn't real and it's this boyfriend of Veronica's... Well, I want to stop him, too.”

32. Chapter 32

Summary for the Chapter:

It's a long night.

And a long day.

Notes for the Chapter:

This is that part where there's a lot of stuff going on as everyone goes on their separate paths toward the same understanding, and so I keep finding more ground to cover before I can get to certain parts, though I think I did manage to cover the small side plot as quickly as possible, so... that's something.

And then I thought I didn't have an ending, but that one worked out very well...

October 12

“Veronica?”

Joyce swung her flashlight around the trees, searching for any sign of her niece. She was soaked, but she couldn't stop when the girl was out here, not in this weather. She wanted to be wrong, wanted to go back to her own warm bed, but she was responsible for Veronica now. If she thought her niece was safe, she would probably let her go, but as far as she knew, Veronica had no one to come for her, no one to turn to, and that meant she was out here, lost in the woods.

Joyce thought back to her words earlier, how she was afraid that they couldn't afford to send her to school, and she just couldn't stop, hoping this wasn't some misguided attempt on her niece's part to make things better by leaving.

If they had somewhere else safe and secure, and Veronica wanted to go, that was different. This... this was grief, and it couldn't be allowed to kill a girl who still had so much to live for.

“Veronica?”

Chester barked again, yanking on the rope and tripping Joyce. She landed hard on the ground, dropping her flashlight. It shut off, and she couldn't see anything as the dog disappeared deeper into the woods, still barking.

“Damn it,” Joyce muttered, pushing herself up from the mud. She looked around again, not even sure where the flashlight was.

She turned back, making her way out how she'd come, using the bit of light that was filtering in to guide her. She shivered her way back inside, standing just inside the door and shivering for a good minute before she pushed herself on.

She should wake Jonathan, she knew that, much as she hated to, but there was no way she was going to find Veronica on her own. Hell, she'd managed to lose the dog now, too.

She went over to the phone and picked it up. Someone was going to be very angry with her, but she needed help, and it was his job, right? She'd get Jonathan in a minute, but it would take a lot longer for anyone else to get here.

She listened through the first two rings, about to hang up and just get her son, though she didn't know how much good this would do, if any. And she had to change and try and find something thicker to wear so that she didn't freeze.

“What?”

“Hop,” Joyce said, feeling guilty all over again at the way he'd barked out the word. “I'm sorry to call you like this but... Veronica's missing from her room. The cars are still here. She didn't take them. But the storm is bad and... I can't see her anywhere in the yard. She's not responding when I call... Something bad has happened. I know it. She's out there in the storm and she's... she's in trouble.”

“Joyce—”

“I know it's late. I know it's dark and rainy and... I lost my damned flashlight, Hop. What the hell do I do? How am I supposed to find her like this?”

“There's a chance I won't be able to do anything, either.”

“I know, and I... I shouldn't have called. Forget it.”

“No, Joyce. I'm coming. You just stay put and give me a few minutes, okay?”

“Thank you, Hop. I... I didn't know what else to do...”

Hop sighed. “Stay calm, okay? I'm on my way.”

She hung up and shuddered.

He couldn't see much in the rain, and dragging his body on when he was as drained as he was, plus Veronica, was not helping him any. He couldn't recover like this, and he needed to if he was going to get them out of here. He knew he could get a cigarette going without his ability, but he wasn't so sure about controlling it enough to get him and Veronica safely anywhere.

He was not killing her. He wouldn't risk that.

He could make it away from these people and rest, and by the time they were far enough, Veronica would be awake and able to help anyway. He just had to keep pushing a little longer. If he could find them a safe enough spot in the trees, he'd close his eyes and rest again.

He wished he could be sure he was moving them back toward the sheds. He was probably lost now, since he hadn't mapped out all of the woods—he didn't really need to with an ability that took him more or less right where he wanted to be—and he wasn't big on exploring anyway.

That wasn't him. Maybe someday, but not now.

He liked the thought of taking Veronica on trips around the world, seeing anything and everything she wanted to, but then... it wasn't something he'd do alone. That was a bit weird to think about, that he needed her like that. Why should he? He shouldn't.

Except something with him and Veronica got tangled and unbalanced and was something he couldn't let go of, even if he mostly thought sometimes he should.

He stopped to lean them both against a tree. He needed a minute. He wrapped his arm around her and held her. "I really wish I knew what they got you with. Or that I could use my whole burn off the drug thing to help you. I shouldn't have done the rain thing but I thought it would help..."

He looked her over. He knew, drained as he was, trying to experiment with his ability to purge drugs was a mistake. He'd kill her for sure. That and she should be awake and knowing he was doing risky stuff with her.

The lab had never asked him. Papa pretended to make sure he was okay with what they were doing, but he never was, and he lied to please Papa, and he would not do that to Veronica.

He leaned his head against hers. "I think you'd have a better plan than me if you were awake. You're the smart one. I'm just the freak from a lab."

She was also the first one to make him think he could ever be more than that, which was part of how this thing between them got so strong and wrong all at the same time.

Maybe he should have taken that radio. If he had, he could have known if they were still out here looking for them. Maybe he was forcing them through this for nothing.

He sighed. "Okay, time to get up again. We have to keep moving."

She didn't respond, and he sighed, thinking they probably overdosed her, gave her enough for a man or someone like him, not just a girl her size—she was small compared to some—and it was a mess all

around.

At least he knew she was still alive, just not able to help herself right now. That was okay. He was here and he'd get them out of here.

Hop looked up at the dark clouds that seemed to have settled almost right over the Byers' house. He had almost called her back and told her to go to hell after he'd woken up enough to dress and gone outside, seeing no sign of a storm near the overly tranquil lake.

He'd gone anyway, since Joyce wasn't the type to call him up for a prank. If she thought something was wrong, she meant it, and he wasn't one of those idiots who thought it was all in her head. It wasn't like he hadn't seen for himself that the girl had some problems. She was pretty skittish when Hop had met her, if he could even call it that, and maybe she'd gotten spooked again tonight.

He parked in front of the house, turning off the engine and getting out, taking a look around as he did. Joyce wasn't wrong about the cars. The girl hadn't driven herself anywhere, if she could drive.

And he hadn't seen anyone else on the road, not that he would have if the girl had been gone for a while, and she must have been, at least long enough to convince Joyce, who was almost always determined to do things on her own, that she had to call him, of anyone.

Sure, he was the chief of police, but they had their problems, and things had never been the same between them after they were over. Time and distance had lessened things, but there was still a lingering bit of awkward to every time they met.

He shook it off and walked up to the house.

"Joyce?" Hop called, pulling open the front door. "Joyce, where are you?"

"In here," Jonathan called, and Hop frowned, following the boy's voice down the hall to Joyce's room. "I made her come back in to change. She can't stop shivering and her teeth are chattering."

She looked up from her bed, still visibly shaking. "Veronica's out in

that, Hop. Without her coat, without anything..."

"You're sure she's out there?"

"I checked the house and the sheds," Jonathan said. "She's not in any of them, and I thought I heard the dog barking, but I couldn't see him. Can't find any of the other flashlights, either."

"The dog?"

"I thought... could use it... to help..." Joyce said, shivering again. "He ran off, I fell... the flashlight stopped working. I called you, woke Jonathan... but she's out there... I can't see her, but I know, and in this weather..."

A girl who'd been burned and traumatized out in a storm. Yeah, that was a recipe for disaster.

Hop grabbed a blanket, pulling it up over her shoulders. "You get warm and stay put in case she comes back. Jonathan, show me where you've already looked."

"Hop—"

"I'll find her, Joyce."

She nodded, pulling the blanket closer. "I know. Thank you."

November 11

"We need to find a way to get you home," Veronica said, and Barb found herself nodding. She'd been trying to figure one out when she wasn't cleaning up or worrying about them, but she didn't know what she was going to do because none of her stories did enough to make it so she covered why she was gone but also kept them from knowing that Jay had helped her.

"I'm working on it," Barb told her. "You need to rest. You were almost killed."

Veronica sighed, putting a hand to her head. "Don't remind me. I don't want to think about that. No, we can... we may not know where we are, but we can figure out a story for your parents and the police."

"I thought I had one," Barb said, sitting down across from her. "I figured... since you saw that thing take me... I could say it was some... guy. That I never saw his face. That it was a mask, maybe. I wouldn't mention that creepy other place with death everywhere or him. I'd just say someone took me and I got away somehow but don't know who he was or anything. It should have been enough, and every time someone pushed, I could just say I didn't want to talk about it."

Veronica nodded. "It almost works."

"Except they'd look for Jay, right?"

"Hopper already thinks he took Will. And he did take me, so if my aunt saw him... I'm worried. I think he's going to get hurt if anyone sees him," Veronica said, and Barb found herself agreeing. She was worried, too. She didn't like how long he'd been gone already, and she knew he didn't have enough food here. He should be resting. And Veronica still didn't look great but at least she wasn't running off being stupid and putting herself in harm's way.

"If... If it wasn't for the lab, I think I'd have a solution."

Barb frowned. "What?"

"Well, if this thing takes kids, and that would have to be the story because it can't be him or the lab or the monster it really is, just some creep who likes to hurt kids... what if he'd already taken one when he took you? Not Will. Jay, as you're calling him. What if he took Jay first?"

"And, what, Jay helps him get his victims?"

"I was thinking more that he helped get you free," Veronica answered. She looked uncomfortable, "though that would explain a few things if he did have to... help this guy. So this creep, he takes

kids. Has one he's been hurting for a long time—which is almost true because he was abused so badly by that lab and by others after he was free—and he forces that one to help him lure others out, but that same kid... he did the right thing and freed you...”

“And I could say I was pretty sure he was dead,” Barb said. “That would make them stop looking for him.”

Veronica nodded. “It might. I mean, the lab won't buy it, but your parents would and the town... it would almost be enough.”

Barb liked it, actually, as twisted as it was. It wasn't that far from the truth. Jay had saved her from that thing that took her, and she could tell he was screwed up, powers or not. “So what do we do? He said to wait a day before walking back, and you're in no condition to walk anywhere.”

“I'm not going back without him.”

“Veronica, that's insane.”

“I know, but I've spent over a month doubting my sanity and being pushed further over the edge by those people. They tried to kill me. They're not going to stop. Clearly just leaving me alive as bait isn't enough anymore, so if they're going to kill me... I'm not going to stick around. Not that I plan to abandon everyone, but... I won't let them have another chance. I want to fight back, but so far... that hasn't gone very well for me. They got me by surprise or overwhelmed me with numbers, but it doesn't change the fact that I lost more than once. So I'm not going to be stupid and think just because I know what they're up and I'm really, truly clear, more than I have been since that night my family died, that I can just... win this time. I know I'll need a lot more than how incredibly pissed off I am right now to make winning possible. We need a plan and a way to take down that lab for good. That story is fine for almost everyone else. It might even make it possible to give him a place and an identity in this town, but not so long as the lab exists.”

Barb bit her lip. “Can't he just... burn it down?”

“That's the scary part,” Veronica said. “I think he can.”

“Hello?”

“Is this Betty Finn?” Joyce asked into the phone, feeling a bit stupid and also a bit crowded with Hop right outside the booth, almost blocking her in and wanting to make her panic.

“Yes, this is—but... you should know that, Veronica.”

Joyce bit her lip, leaning against the wall and refusing to cry. She wasn't sure if it was relief or something else getting that reaction from her. At least this was the right person, the right girl. “Um, no, I'm sorry. This is Veronica's aunt, Joyce. We... we sound a lot alike, I guess.”

“Oh.”

“Um, I was just hoping maybe you could tell me a few things,” Joyce began. “I understand things were a little strained between the two of you, and I hope this isn't too inconvenient or—”

“Did something happen to Veronica?”

Joyce flinched. “Um... I... yes. Veronica was in the hospital again lately. I think she may have left with her boyfriend.”

“Veronica didn't have a boyfriend,” the girl said. “I know that boys liked her and she went to parties and had dates—she missed my birthday for one, but she didn't have a steady boyfriend. Some say Kurt Kelly wanted to be, that's why he picked a fight with that new kid that lit him on fire—”

“What?”

“But that kid, even if he did flirt with Veronica, he died that night. They said it was the gas main, just like Veronica's house, though at first they didn't find his body and thought he'd killed his father or something crazy like that, but later they found him and so he's dead.”

Joyce knew he wasn't, though. He had been alive as of yesterday. “What was his name? This boy?”

"I don't know why it matters, since he's dead—"

"Humor me," Joyce said. "If this isn't the guy that she left with... I need that name to get the cops looking somewhere else for her, okay? Please. I can't lose her. And I don't... if this isn't him, something really bad has happened, so I need that name."

"Is she going to be all right?"

"I really don't know right now. I won't know unless we can find her."

"Oh," Betty said in a small voice. "Um... the name. it was Dean. Jason Dean."

"Thank you. So much."

"Will you let me know what happens? If Veronica's okay? Please?"

"Of course. She'll be glad to know you still care. She was afraid she'd hurt you too much," Joyce said. "I'll let you know as soon as I know anything."

She hung up and looked back at Hop.

"Well?"

"Jason Dean. It's the name of a kid who set some other boy at school on fire."

Hop stared at her. "You're kidding."

"No, that's what Betty said. That he wasn't a boyfriend but died in a fire at his house with his father just like the one that took Veronica's parents."

"The hell he did."

"She also said that at first they thought he caused the fire and killed his dad," Joyce said. "Then later they found his body and he died, too. Hop, it's him. It has to be him. This kid that they called Jason Dean, that's the same one Veronica told me about."

"I'll see if I can get any information on him," Hop said, gesturing for her to move. She watched him cram himself in the booth and knew he had to be uncomfortable. He was so much bigger than she was. He picked up the phone and dialed, jamming coins into it. "Hey, Frank. It's Jim. I was hoping you could track down someone for me. Well, two someones. Yeah, I know, but this is kind of an emergency. I've got three missing kids and a bunch of stuff that doesn't add up, okay? Right. First, Jason Dean. Last known sighting was in Sherwood, Ohio. Got that?"

Joyce waited, trying not to get too impatient. She hated this, knowing that if they took very long to do this, they might lose Veronica or Jonathan might decide to do something stupid. She was worried. She couldn't help it.

"Okay, second is Ives. Terry Ives. I just need a current address for her," Hop said. "That's Terry with a 'Y.' Yeah, I got a pen. Hang on. Mmm-hmm. Mmm-hmm. Great, thanks. I really appreciate this, Frank. Say hi to the boys for me, too, would you?"

He hung up, and Joyce swallowed.

"Did you get it?"

"I got it," Hop said. "Let's go see if she has anything that can help us."

"Okay."

"How much further?" Lucas asked ahead of them, and Mike was almost as frustrated as Dustin was when he spoke, since he wanted to get there already and find Will. It felt like they'd been walking for days, not hours.

"I don't know," Dustin said. "These only tell direction, not distance. You really need to learn more about compasses."

Lucas looked at him, and Dustin shrugged.

"I'm just saying."

Lucas sighed. "Fine. How do we know when we get to the gate?"

"Uh, I think a portal to another dimension is gonna be pretty obvious," Dustin said, and Mike grimaced. He figured that Lucas would still be upset. It felt like they had been walking for days, and all of them were a bit short-tempered as it was.

"Do you think she's acting weird?"

"You're asking if the weirdo is acting weird?"

"I mean, weirder than normal?"

"I don't know," Dustin said. "Who cares?"

Mike frowned at them, letting his pace slow to match El's. She wasn't keeping up with him or the others. He'd thought he was closer to her before, but now he knew he wasn't.

"Mike."

He frowned at her, not sure what that tone was but knowing he didn't like it much. "Yeah?"

"Turn back."

"What?" Mike demanded. She had to know that they couldn't do that. "Why?"

"I'm tired."

He sighed. "Look, I'm sure we're almost there. Just hold on a little longer, okay?"

She frowned. "Mike... if there was a fire mage... would you still go to the gate? Would you go to the Upside Down?"

"I'd go wherever I had to," Mike said. "Will is my friend. If he's alive, I have to help him. I have to. I can't abandon him in that place. That's not who I am. We're friends. We're a party. We make sure everyone comes through alive. That's what you do in a party. You fight for each other. You help each other, no matter the risk."

She looked away. He frowned.

“El, is there something we should know?”

“The fire mage... he isn't in your party. He wouldn't fight for you.”

Mike watched her for a second, searching her face. “Do you know him? I thought you said there wasn't a Nine. That he's not real.”

“I... I want to understand. He is... a stranger. He is not a friend. Why do you think he'd help you? Fight for you?”

“It's the right thing to do,” Mike said. He couldn't give her a better answer than that, but he had to hope that if this guy was real and they asked him for his help, he'd give it. “You'd do it, right? If it was you. You'd help.”

She gave him a small smile, and he smiled back.

“You're sure about this, right?”

Nancy looked over at Jonathan. “I'm sure. I just need to change clothes before we go. I wasn't really planning on monster hunting when I put this on. Plus, I need something to use against that thing if we see it. I'm not going unarmed. That's just stupid.”

Jonathan nodded, and she tried not to fidget as he pulled up near her house. She just needed a few minutes. She'd rather be in jeans and a shirt she didn't much care about rather than one of the skirts she wore to school. She hadn't really expected this to be her day, but it was now, and she was going to do something about it.

“I could go back to my house while you're doing this.”

“It won't take me that long, and it's a waste of gas to go over there and back when we're headed back that way anyway after this,” Nancy told him. “It's fine, unless you really have a problem waiting.”

He shook his head. “No. I don't. I just... I'd rather be keeping busy, but it's not—”

"You could make a call to Veronica's friends," Nancy said. "Totally. If my mom asks, I'll say it was me. And we did want to know for ourselves about this guy, right?"

Jonathan nodded, parking his car at the end of the cul-de-sac instead of in front of her house. She almost asked him about it, but he spoke first. "I mean, if he's not real and my mom and Hopper are looking in the wrong direction..."

"Exactly," Nancy said, getting out, though she'd definitely seen something herself. She wasn't sure if that guy in Indianapolis was Veronica's boyfriend or not, but she'd seen someone. He'd been real enough when he was making out with Veronica.

Nancy led Jonathan into the house, pointing him to the phone in the living room and running upstairs to her room. She had promised she wouldn't take long, and she swore she wouldn't. She didn't need all that much.

She swapped out her shirt for an older one that was faded and from a phase she'd deny to her dying day at this point—she so would never show Steve this thing—and hiked her jeans on under her skirt before pulling it off. She put on her Keds and grabbed a thicker coat before she went back downstairs.

She could hear Jonathan talking, and she figured she'd look for her weapon rather than interrupting him. She went outside to the rack by the garage, studying her choices.

A gun was a better one, maybe even a knife, but she picked up the baseball bat her father had gotten Mike a few years ago—one he never used as he was so not into sports, none of his friends were—and tested its weight.

Decent. She swung it a few times, trying to see if she was really up to using it.

"Whoa, whoa, hey, whoa, whoa," Steve said, and Nancy stared at him, startled. She'd almost hit him, hadn't heard him come up at all.

"What are you doing here?"

He gave her a strange sort of smile. "What are you doing?"

She could not explain to him that she was about to go monster hunting with Jonathan Byers. He would not understand. At all. "Nothing."

Steve gestured to the bat. "I hope that's not meant for me."

"What? No." She had been mad at him the other day when he put getting in trouble with his parents over Barb's disappearance and the danger she could be in, but that almost seemed like it had happened weeks ago now. She had so much else on her mind. "Oh, no, I was just... thinking about joining softball."

"Oh," Steve said, and she wasn't sure if she'd convinced him or not. "Well, uh, listen, I'm really sorry. I mean, even before you threatened me with the baseball bat."

"Okay."

"I panicked and..." He sighed. "I mean, I was a total dick."

"Yeah, you were," she agreed, but at least he knew that now and wasn't pretending otherwise. He'd even apologized. "Did you get in trouble with your parents?"

"Totally, but you know, who cares?" Steve shrugged. "Screw 'em. Any news about Barbara? Parents heard from her? Or—"

"No," Nancy said. "She's gone. And now—"

"Hey, listen. Why don't we, uh, why don't we catch a movie tonight, you know?" Steve suggested, taking her hands and giving her a smile. "Just kinda pretend everything's normal for a few hours. *All The Right Moves* is still playing. You know, with your lover boy from *Risky Business*?"

She forced a laugh. "Yeah, I know."

"You know, Carol thinks I actually kinda look like him," Steve said, smiling. He tried to make a pose, and she just wanted to tell him to go. She wasn't going to be cheered up like this, no matter how sweet

his intentions were. “What do you think? Huh? *Just take those old records off the shelf. I’ll sit and listen to them by myself—*”

“I can’t,” Nancy said, and he frowned at her. “It’s been so crazy lately... They don’t know when the funeral will be, but this has been very hard on my brother. And Barb is missing and then Veronica—”

“Yeah, I heard she’s in the hospital. She tried to kill herself, right?”

Nancy looked at him. “Don’t say it. Don’t you dare say she had something to do with Will dying. She didn’t. She’s got problems, but she’s not a killer.”

Steve held up his hands. “Hey, I didn’t say a word. I just... if I can do anything, I want to help. I mean it. I thought maybe a night away from things...”

She shook her head. The only thing that would help would be finding that thing and killing it. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Yeah, sure. Sure, yeah, yeah,” Steve said, getting a little awkward now. “So I should go...?”

She nodded. “Sorry.”

“I’ll call you later,” he told her, and she tried not to panic about it. She wasn’t going to be here. “Is that okay?”

She forced a nod. “Yeah. Yeah, of course.”

He walked away smiling and singing, and she almost collapsed with relief. That died half a minute later when Jonathan came out of the house.

“You okay?”

She nodded. “Yeah. Fine. I just... I think I have what I need.”

She lifted the bat to show him, and he gave her a bit of a smile. He looked behind her and the smile got bigger. “You know, it’s funny. I think Veronica would have picked the croquet mallet.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Not sure why. Just... seems like her.”

Nancy picked it up. No harm in having them both. “What did you find out?”

“That had to be one of the weirdest conversations I’ve ever had,” Jonathan admitted. “And my cousin told me all about her boyfriend who could make fire and a giant conspiracy, so...”

Nancy almost laughed. “So?”

“I spoke to the Heathers. I think all three of them. It was confusing. One picked up, said it was Heather, another said ‘Heather, don’t answer Heather’s phone,’ and the last got all pissed off when I asked about Veronica, but I did get a name.”

“And?”

“He’s supposed to be dead.”

“What the fuck is wrong with your family?”

Veronica almost jumped, looking behind her to see her pyro stumbling around the couch. She watched him, twisting her lip. She’d been worried before by how long it took him to get back, but now she was worried because of how bad he looked. He was pale, obviously tired, about the same as he’d been that first night at her house.

“What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong? I’m a dangerous, psychotic killer,” he said, sounding very bitter. “To blame for all the evils of the universe, thank you very much.”

Veronica winced. “That’s not true. We can prove that.”

“Before I get shot again?” He shook his head. “I doubt it. All of them want me dead because I took Will and Barb. I’m not guilty of either of

those things. I took you, yes. That's it. Okay, so I have done some other things that—”

“I'd have gone with you willingly if I could have,” Veronica said. “And they should know that.”

“I don't think they care,” he snapped. “I'm a dangerous killer. And kidnapper. And you're just my delusional little victim. You don't know the real me. They think you've been lied to and tricked and are in just as much danger as Will and Barbara.”

“Well, actually, it's kind of true in one sense,” Barb said, and he looked at her, frowning. “I just mean... you haven't hurt me or Will, and I know you won't hurt Veronica. So... yeah, she's in that much danger because she's not in *any*.”

He stared at her long enough for his condition to catch up to him, and Veronica could only watch as he wavered, almost falling. Barb jumped up to stop him from tumbling, leading him over to the couch next to Veronica.

“Why are you helping me?”

“She's a good person,” Veronica told him, “and you haven't done anything wrong. Not this time.”

“Oh, but despite that, your aunt and the cop are going to look for someone who might have information on me. Not just Betty Finn, but some other woman, and because they get excluded from this hunt for me, Jonathan and shallow girl who's obsessed with Mr. Big Hair—”

“Nancy?”

“—Are going out after the monster.”

“What the hell?” Veronica asked. “I'd understand Hopper doing that, but Jonathan? He can't even admit that everyone in his life—his mom included, much as she tries hard—has screwed him over. He can't hurt anyone, but he's going to fight a monster?”

Barb winced. “They have to be desperate.”

"Your aunt did ask them to stay out of it," he said, leaning his head back and closing his eyes. "She's worried about losing Jonathan, too."

"You can't let them go after that thing."

Veronica shook her head. "Look at him. Does he look like he's in any condition to stop them? And what if... what if they do something stupid and hurt him?"

"Okay, so... Nancy's doing this because she wants to find me, right?" Barb asked. "What if we... what if we show her I'm okay? She'll stop."

Veronica nodded. "We can just get you home. We have a story now that mostly works. It's fine."

"She has to walk back on her own," he said, and Veronica stared at him. "She does. Can't be rescued, can't be dumped near her house... and... I can't..."

"You need to rest and eat," Barb said. "We'll figure out the rest of it after that. Stay put. I think I found some cans in the kitchen that I can use to make some real food for a change."

He nodded. Veronica put her hand on his cheek, and he opened his eyes to look at her. "They're fine. For now. I swear I didn't leave any of them hurting. I meant to steal some of the cop's food but got distracted when I heard they were going after the monster."

"And you?" Veronica asked. "Are you really okay?"

He leaned his head against hers. "I do need food. And rest. It... this thing... it has a world out there. Not like the one you saw when you were with me. Similar, but not. Everything there is like Hawkins. Only... dead. Rotting. Covered with vines."

"You're kidding, right?"

He shook his head. "No."

"That's what my great aunt said she saw. That was what was coming for all of us. It's why she measured me for the damned coffin."

33. Chapter 33

Summary for the Chapter:

Hop finds Veronica in the forest.

Veronica, Barb, and Nine discuss what their discovery could mean and try to prepare. Jonathan and Nancy find complications on their path to the monster.

Notes for the Chapter:

I feel like it's been much longer since the last update, though it has only been two days. I ran into more issues with being brain dead and also some personal stuff.

I was also thinking, after I finally settled on what was going in this part and trying to fix the issues I'd raised (and created out of nowhere, oops) that Steve really should have more stuff in season one that shows how nice of a guy he really is like season two makes him. I didn't have anywhere to fit that in here, but it may be something to work towards as I go on, especially as I've discovered I completely ruined the timeline of the show.

October 13

He slumped down against the tree, feeling defeated.

He had taken Veronica as far as he thought he could make them go. Every step hurt, and he was too sore to keep going himself, let alone move her. He didn't want to think it, but the strain was getting to him, that and the weather. The rain wouldn't stop, and he swore it

shouldn't even be this intense a storm—he was not *that* powerful, just able to make some fires and do a few tricks.

He thought he liked the tricks better.

They were at least warmer than this. He was soaked through, and so was Veronica, and he knew she shouldn't be as cold as she was. He needed to get her someplace dry, but he was almost certain now he'd gone in the wrong way from where he'd meant to, as he'd been thinking about taking her over to her family's sheds. They were dry, and he didn't think the agents from the lab would try to use them or look in them, not when they had bodies in the woods and radio reports had said Veronica was found out there.

He pulled her close to him. They would believe she'd been drugged, he thought, or maybe he just wanted to believe that since that man had radioed in that he found her. He'd moved the body and made rain so they wouldn't know he had been shot where he attacked Veronica.

It might be enough to keep her alive.

If the cold didn't kill her first.

He swore she wasn't breathing as fast as she had before. He didn't think that was a good sign. People got cold, their breathing slowed down, and they died. He'd seen that somewhere. He couldn't remember where now. He couldn't think very well. That was part of why he was such a failure. He was useless when his fires took too much from him, and he'd never been all that smart in the first place.

He looked down at her. “I won't be able to get us out of here if I do this, but I don't want you getting any colder or... dying or something.”

He couldn't lose her. If he knew nothing else, it was that he couldn't lose Veronica. He didn't know what he'd do if he did—maybe burn the whole lab down with himself in it. Maybe he'd do worse than Kali and her friends. He didn't know. He just knew that he didn't really feel like trying to be a better person without her around.

And that was wrong, somehow, and he was aware that it was, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

He dug in his pocket, took out the lighter and grimaced, putting it back away when he realized the flame wouldn't withstand the water for as long as it would take to do what he needed to do.

Fine, then. This would hurt. A lot. Again.

He didn't care. He held a hand out and spread the warmth over her, keeping the flame contained but hot enough to counter the chill that had tried to go deep inside him and had to be worse in her because she hadn't been moving on her own. He'd done all that for her.

They had to have given her too much of the drugs for her size. That was what it was. It made sense. He remembered Papa telling him how bad that was and how it had almost been a very costly mistake with him.

He had actually thought that bastard cared about him then. Not now.

He couldn't keep the fire going any longer, and he withdrew his hand, cutting it off. He pressed his lips to her forehead, taking a breath and trying to keep himself awake enough to protect them.

"You... just... make it... and I'll... fix this... somehow," he told her, wishing she'd wake up. He wanted to see her eyes again and to be sure she would make it.

"Veronica? Veronica, that you over there?" a new voice asked, a man's. "It's Chief Hopper. We met before? At the store. Your aunt's worried sick. Jonathan, too. I sent him back with the damned dog. Veronica?"

Shit.

He forced himself up and tried to lift her again, but he fell, unable to stand himself. This wouldn't work. He couldn't save her. He shouldn't have used the fire to warm her. Maybe if he hadn't, he could have done it, dragged them into the other world and out of here.

As it was, he'd be lucky if he could scare that guy off with a bit of

fire.

He refused to put her in between him and the man, so he crawled to another tree, leaning against it and closing his eyes for a second as he tried to gain some strength, enough to deal with this Chief Hopper.

He heard something and saw Veronica stirring, and he bit back a swear as she did. She couldn't have done that two minutes ago? Really? Was he cursed or she was or what?

“Veronica?” Hopper asked, coming around the tree she was against, and she screamed when she saw him, backing away. “Hold on. It's Hopper. Chief Hopper. We met before. You were in the store. I mistook you for your aunt at first. You look a lot like she did when I first met her. Years have been a hell of a lot kinder to her than me, that's for damned sure. She'd just laugh about that if she heard it. I mean... Damn, I'm not helping things, am I?”

Veronica looked up at him, trembling. “I killed him.”

Hop had to admit, the confession threw him. He was just supposed to be finding a lost teenager, a girl who'd gotten lost in woods she didn't know when she went out too late to clear her head and got caught in a storm. Simple stuff. Not really even something Joyce should have had to call him about, though he wasn't entirely complaining, not after seeing how badly she'd been shaken and how much she needed to stop before she made herself sick.

He didn't much love the idea of Jonathan out in the rain, either, but he wasn't soaked through and trembling when Hop got here, so he'd accepted the help he could get. Besides, someone had to take that dog back to the house before it got lost again.

Still...

“I think we should get you back to the house, kid.”

“No,” Veronica said, backing away from him. “I killed him. I can't go back. I can't.”

“Listen to me,” Hop said, making no move to touch her since she as

skittish as hell right now. "You may blame yourself for living when no one else did. God knows most of us in Vietnam know what that was like, myself included, and me... Well, I've got other reasons, but you know what? You're not doing anything wrong by being alive."

She shook her head. "I killed him."

"No, don't," he began, but was too late and could and only grimace as she scrambled away from him. She wasn't going very fast, but he wasn't an idiot. The minute he went after her, things were going to go from bad to worse. "I don't want to hurt you, okay? I just want to take you back to your aunt. She's worried. We can deal with the rest of it later."

Veronica didn't stop, though, still trying to get away from him. Hop had to run after her, catching her a few feet away. She screamed bloody murder when he caught her, lifting her up.

"I'm sorry. I swear I'm not going to hurt you. Just let me take you back to the house."

"No. No. Let me go," she said, struggling in his hold and beating on him as she started to cry. "I didn't... I killed him... I can't go back... I..."

He let her fight herself out as he carried her back, her ramblings getting worse and worse as she went on, and he hated himself for it a little more each time, but he was not leaving her out here like this. Hell, no.

She'd said something about a body and a gun, and that wasn't anything to do with a fire, but he'd figure that out later. In the morning, when he could really see again, he'd take a look around the woods, but he didn't see how the girl could have killed anyone. She was in no state for it, for one, and who the hell would be out in the woods by Joyce's house at this time of night, anyway?

No, if the girl killed something, it was probably an animal, by accident, and it had nothing to do with a gun, but she'd been so messed up by the storm and getting lost plus her past she didn't know up from down at the moment—she was still trying to get free, after

all—and he knew none of the stuff he kept telling her was making any difference.

He didn't stop, though, even knowing he was shit at this because he certainly hadn't helped anyone before, not just when he couldn't help his wife was their daughter was dying but long before then as well. Every case he had as a cop, but going back to being a lousy boyfriend, friend, and son as he grew up. Hop was one lifelong screw up, or so his father would say.

He cleared the trees, hearing his name, and then Joyce was running up to them, embracing him for a second before taking Veronica from him and holding onto her.

“Thank you, Hop,” Joyce said, looking up from her niece. “Thank you.”

November 11

“What are you talking about?” Jay asked, sounding both confused and exhausted. “What aunt? What coffin?”

“Hold on,” Barb said, coming around the couch again with a bag of chips. She hated to give up one of the few things they had left that anyone could eat, but she could tell he was fading fast, and they needed him to heal up because he was the only one who stood a chance against that thing. Nancy and Jonathan were going after it, and they would get themselves killed. Even Hopper and Joyce might end up dead going after someone connected to the lab. “Eat. We'll explain while you do.”

“We?” Veronica asked, frowning. “What do you know about my great aunt?”

Barb grimaced. “Everyone in Hawkins knows about your great aunt. She was one of those living legends, our own boogeyman, of sorts. Not that she was... I mean, from what I read, she was just... troubled, and no one could really blame her for that.”

"I'm still confused," Jay said. "Who the hell is this woman? And how could she have known about the other world?"

"In 1923, thirteen year old Darlene went missing from her home. To this day, no one is really sure if she was taken or ran away. Things weren't... great there, from what I read," Barb said, aware of the eyes on her. "We had assignments in local history for school. I got the twenties as my assigned decade, and the other kids had already taken prohibition and women's suffrage. I chose the only thing that was left, and it was actually kind of interesting... if tragic. They searched for her for days. When they finally found her, she was a mess. Malnourished, feverish, cut from wandering the woods. She wouldn't speak about what had happened. It scared everyone back then. It was only later she spoke about what happened and everyone said she was crazy. That... or things had been so much worse than days lost wandering the woods that she chose her story as a way to escape the truth."

Veronica swallowed. "What truth?"

"No one knows, not exactly. Some think she was taken from her house and... well... violated, that the guy left her for dead and that's how she ended up wandering around like she did. It's not impossible, but as her story of what happened to her when she disappeared was never... clear, they didn't know. She was found miles from her house, far further than anyone expected, but they still couldn't prove there was anyone else involved."

Veronica shivered. "She didn't say anything about that when I met her. Actually, I still to this day don't know why my mom made us go see her. She had never done anything like that before. She almost never talked about Hawkins or anything from here. Barely acknowledged her sister other than Christmas cards."

"That is weird," Barb said. "You really don't know why you went to see her?"

"I think because she'd had a bad spell or something, like everyone figured she was dying and my mom wanted it off her conscience," Veronica said, shrugging. "I really don't know."

Jay wadded up the chip bag and lit it on fire, turning it to ash. Barb was not the only one to give him a look for it. He shrugged, still showing his fatigue. "It saves time and doesn't make anyone clean it up... now... what did she say... about the other world? All of it."

"There wasn't much. Mom panicked when she started talking and made us go," Veronica said. "It was... weird, but Great Aunt Darlene was fascinating at the same time. I remember her telling us that the world was all dark. All the time. That death followed her everywhere she stepped, everything she saw. And she saw death around me. That was what freaked my mom out. She dragged me out of there so fast I thought she would never stop speeding, and she almost didn't, not 'til we were almost home."

"It is pretty vague," Barb said. "Not really enough to connect what she may or may not have seen or dreamed to what we actually saw and walked through. Without shoes, even."

Veronica looked at Barb's feet and grimaced. "Ew."

"You said she saw darkness coming."

Veronica frowned. "You think she really saw this? How? You can walk between the worlds, but you were... forced into that. Experimented on. My great aunt... she was just weird. Insane, maybe, definitely traumatized."

He leaned over to touch Veronica's forehead. "I told you. There's something special about you. Up here. Something more."

"Like... what you are?" Barb asked, feeling a bit unnerved by that.

He pulled his hand back. "Papa would have called it potential. He would have wanted to use it."

"Papa?" Barb swallowed. "This guy was actually your father?"

"No. Don't... I think he lied to me to make me believe he was my father so I'd do what he wanted. I don't think he ever was. I just... wanted him to be pleased with me... and I did... horrible things for him because I wanted to impress him," Jay said. "None of that matters. I have to find a way to stop them from being stupid."

"You going to stop them now would get you killed, possibly. We don't even know why you weren't when you went to check on Joyce."

He snorted. "Oh, that's easy. It's not like I make a lot of noise when I firewalk. And coming out doesn't mean a fire, only going in. They didn't see me, and I stayed still to listen."

"And because it hurt a lot, right?"

He grimaced. "That, too."

"You're quiet again," Jonathan observed, and Nancy tried not to grimace. She really didn't need him to be observant right now. She didn't want it, either. She was trying to keep her mind on Barb and how they were going to fight this monster, not let thoughts of guilt and Steve distract her. "If you'd rather I take you back home—"

"No, I was just... I'm... Steve showed up at the house while you were on the phone," Nancy admitted. When Jonathan didn't react, she added. "He was there to apologize. And I know... he should be saying something to you for your camera, but... he was... He wanted to help, and I didn't let him. I sent him away, didn't even tell him the truth about what I was doing."

Jonathan looked at her. "What, you didn't want to admit to being in my company?"

She stared at him, unable to summon words to respond to that.

"Relax. I know you didn't want to tell him we were going monster hunting. Even now, saying it to you, when we both believe in this thing, it's weird. I can't believe we're doing this."

"It does seem a little crazy," Nancy agreed. "Are you sure you can use that hunting rifle? I mean, I'm a bit worried about how much good I'd actually do with the baseball bat. Or the croquet mallet."

"I figured we'd do some practice shooting first," he said, and she looked at him. "I mean, me, at least. You ever shot a gun before?"

She snorted. "Have you met my parents?"

He laughed a little, like that image amused him. "Yeah, I haven't shot one since I was ten. My dad took me hunting on my birthday. He made me kill a rabbit."

Nancy winced. "A rabbit?"

"Yeah," Jonathan answered as he turned down their driveway. "I guess he thought it would make me into more of a man or something. I cried for a week."

"Jesus."

"What?" Jonathan got defensive. "I'm a fan of Thumper."

That made her smile. Thumper really was one of the better parts of that movie, though she was not admitting she'd cried when Bambi's mother died. "I meant your dad."

"Yeah," Jonathan agreed, falling into silence again until he stopped the car in front of the house. He shut off the engine and got out, walking over to the shed. She climbed out and followed him, not really feeling like waiting in the car.

He held the door open for her at the shed, and she stepped inside, running her hands over her arms. Something about this place felt... off. She didn't like it.

"I forgot. The cops said they'd found mold in here. Bad stuff. You might want to wait here," Jonathan said, and she stared at him. He shrugged. "I don't know. I saw it, and it looked black, but it wasn't there the day before, so I don't know what's going on with that. I think Hopper forgot all about it. I had until just now myself. It was weird, but it didn't seem important."

She nodded. "I'm sure it's fine. Let's just get that gun."

He went over to the bench along the one wall and stopped. "Okay, this is... worse."

"What?"

"The hunting rifle should be right here. Mom didn't want it in the

house, for reasons you can probably guess, and so we never had it there. It was always right on this rack, but now it's not. I know I didn't take it. And the cops didn't confiscate it or anything. It was in here that day my dad showed up and all—Hopper was in here because he thought he saw someone—”

“Veronica's boyfriend?”

“Well, we kind of thought so later, but at the time, not so much. I mean, when Hopper saw someone here and my dad had already been arrested, yeah, he thought it was someone else, but when I mentioned feeling like someone was watching me at school earlier that day, we both figured it must have been my dad. Since neither of us knew about Veronica's boyfriend at the time, we dismissed it. When we knew about him, we figured that could have been him, but we couldn't prove it.”

“Would he have taken the rifle?”

Jonathan grimaced. “I don't know. I mean, on the one hand, it would mean that no one could fight back against him, but then...”

“He's supposed to be able to travel between worlds. What use is a gun against someone like that?”

“When you put it that way, it makes me wonder if there's any point to trying to find this monster.”

Nancy flinched. “There might not be, but we still have to try, right?”

“Um, I hesitate to suggest this because... well... it's awkward, but there is actually a bed in the other room if you're planning on sleeping with him, and since we still don't know how badly they hurt you with the drugs, um...” Barb began, and Veronica smiled at the awkwardness, forcing herself to sit back up. Having him back made it easier for her to rest again, since she now knew her aunt was trapped helpless at the hospital, even if she and Jonathan were on the verge of doing something stupid.

They weren't there yet, and maybe they had a bit of time, or at least,

they had to have some time, since he couldn't go back yet, not in his condition.

“A bed might be a little wider than this couch,” Veronica agreed. He grunted, getting up first. When he wavered a bit, Barb went to his side and guided him in to the other room. Veronica waited, not sure she wanted to risk it on her own.

She definitely hadn't felt right since she woke, and she knew it wasn't as simple as sleeping off the drugs they gave her. They'd tried to kill her.

And she hadn't been able to stop them, again. That still rankled, but she knew that if she got the chance, she'd fight.

Once she'd healed up a bit, she and Jay—was she calling him that, too? She still wouldn't use Nine, and he said he didn't like Jason, which meant either Jay or JD, though 'her pyro' was cute, too, just not a name. It didn't matter. Once she felt better, she was going with him to make these assholes pay.

“He's down again,” Barb said. “Your turn if you want to risk it.”

“Barb, I know you probably think... well, it may come to that, but it's not like that between us now, and believe me, I would never abandon my friends for a guy. I did, before, turn my back on them to be popular, but it's not a mistake I'd make twice,” Veronica said. “It means a lot to both of us that you... care. He's never really had that outside of me, and I know he can seem... scary. What he can do, what he's had to do to survive...”

Barb nodded. “I know. It did scare me at first, and it still worries me some, but when it comes down to it... he's still a person. He didn't have to save me, but he did, and he helped you and Will... and he's going to go back again. I know that, too.”

“I said some really horrible things to Nancy,” Veronica admitted as she rose. “I even blamed her for you getting taken.”

Barb grimaced. “I suppose I had a few of those thoughts myself. I was angry and scared... and I wouldn't have been at that party if not for

her. I even ignored what you said about leaving and... I just felt stupid afterward. I've been trying not to let myself go down that path. It's not... I don't blame her. Even if I would never have gone there without her, it's not her fault. That thing... she couldn't have known it would be there. None of us could. Unless he's right about it tracking blood, which I think he is, but then... he didn't know I'd get hurt and he couldn't have predicted that. If he hadn't been there to watch over you, I think I'd be dead now. And that... scares me so... I clean this place and try not to think."

Veronica rose, touching Barb's arm. "We're going to get you home. As soon as it's safe."

"I know. Come on, let's get you over to the bed," Barb said, helping her walk along. "How are you feeling?"

"It's a little hard to breathe, but I don't... otherwise, I'm just... sore. Tired. I feel like my whole body got beaten black and blue, but it isn't."

"Well, you do have some bruises."

"I tried to get free, but they held on pretty tight," Veronica said, sitting down on the bed. She gave her pyro another look, seeing him open his eyes for a second and extend his hand toward hers. "I'll be okay, Barb. I... I think maybe you'd better wake him in an hour or so. Maybe two? You think we can afford two with Jonathan and Nancy hunting that thing?"

He sighed. "Have to. Can't go much sooner."

"You sleep," she told him, leaning over to kiss his forehead. She laid down next to him, and he snuggled up against her.

"S Okay? Not hurting?"

"Not hurting. Feels good. Now sleep, goofball."

He made a small contented noise, and she smiled again, closing her eyes. She could probably sleep now, and she should, just as much as he should. She had a lot of things going on in her mind, but she hoped having him with her would let it settle for a change.

She didn't think she ever really managed to sleep without the drugs, and she hated it.

"Oh, no," Dustin said, coming to a stop in the junkyard, checking his compass again. Lucas frowned as he got close to him. Sure, Dustin was their party's default worrywart, but that didn't mean that oh, no, was a good thing coming from their compass expert.

"Oh, no?" Lucas asked. "What's 'Oh, no?'"

"We're headed back home."

No. That couldn't be right. They knew this town. It wasn't that big. They were following their compasses. They couldn't be lost.

"What?"

"Are you sure?" Mike asked, frowning like he couldn't believe it, but what more did they really need? They knew where they were. The junkyard. They'd been here hundreds of times before.

"Yeah, I'm sure," Dustin said. "Setting sun, right there. We looped right back around."

Lucas shook his head in frustration. They'd been going in circles for hours, hadn't they? Wasted all this time? Damn it. "And you're just realizing this now?"

Dustin frowned. "Why is this all on me?"

"Because you're the compass genius," Lucas snapped, almost ready to smack him. Dustin knew what was going on. This was his theory after all. "What do yours say?"

"North."

Lucas sighed. "Makes no damn sense."

Mike looked around the junkyard, frowning. "Maybe the gate moved."

"No, I don't think it's the gate," Dustin said. That made sense, because how would the gate move if it required that much power to make in the first place? "I think it's something else screwing with the compasses."

Mike accepted that. "Maybe it's something here."

Dustin shook his head. "No, it has to be like a super magnet."

And they all knew there wasn't anything like that here. Lucas turned around, everything clear for him now. "It's not a magnet. She's been acting weirder than normal. If she can slam doors with her mind, she can definitely screw up a compass."

Mike frowned, looking at the weirdo and back at Lucas. "Why would she do that?"

Lucas couldn't believe how damned blind Mike was. "Because she's trying to sabotage our mission. Because she's a traitor!"

He marched toward her over Mike's protests.

"Lucas, what are you doing?"

"You did it, didn't you?" Lucas demanded when he got closer to Eleven. She was looking a little desperate now, and he knew he was right. "You don't want us to reach the gate. You don't want us to find Will."

"Lucas, come on, seriously," Mike said. "Just leave her alone."

"Admit it," Lucas said, ignoring Mike and his stupid blindness. He picked up her sleeve and confirmed everything. "Fresh blood. I knew it."

"Lucas, come on," Dustin said, trying to keep the peace.

"I saw her wiping her nose on the tracks," Lucas insisted. "She was using her powers!"

"Bull!" Mike cried. "That's old blood. Right, El? Right, El?"

The weirdo looked at him, crying. "It's not... it's not safe."

Lucas shook his head. He knew it. He fucking knew it. "What did I tell you? She's been playing us from the beginning!"

"That's not true," Mike said. "She helped us find Will."

"Find Will?" Lucas demanded, incredulous. Did Mike even hear himself? "Find Will? Where is he, then? Huh? I don't see him."

"You know what I mean."

"No, I actually don't," Lucas said, his voice cold. "Just think about it, Mike. She could've just told us where the Upside Down was right away, but she didn't. She just made us run around like headless chickens."

"All right, calm down—"

"No." Lucas was done being played. "She used us, all of us! She helped just enough so she could get what she wants. Food and a bed. She's like a stray dog."

"Screw you, Lucas!"

"No, screw you, Mike. You're blind because you like that a girl's not grossed out by you. But wake up, man! Wake the hell up! She knows where Will is, and now she's just letting him die in the Upside Down."

"Shut up."

Lucas was not about to stop. "What if she lied about more than that? Maybe she lied about all of it? What if there is a Nine? What if he could have helped us all along and she said he didn't exist? I'm right, aren't I? There's a Nine, isn't there?"

"Shut up!"

"Think about it," Lucas said. "For all we know, it's her fault."

"Shut up."

"We're looking for some stupid monster, but did you ever stop to think that maybe she's the monster?"

"I said, 'shut up,'" Mike said, rushing toward him. Lucas hit the ground hard, the wind knocked out of him as Mike pounded on him.

"Stop," Dustin said, worried. "Knock it off, you idiots. Guys, I'm not kidding. Stop it. Stop it! Mike, get off!"

Dustin tried to intervene, and Lucas rolled them over, getting the upper hand for a change, hitting Mike back for all the times he hit him.

And then, just like that, Lucas was up and in the air, flying and flailing.

Just as fast as it began, he hit the concrete and it was over.

The light flickered above Jonathan's head, and he grimaced, knowing he'd have to fix it later. He was still trying to come to terms with the rifle being gone. That was their best weapon against that thing, and they didn't have it. He didn't know what they were going to do.

The blinking continued, and he rolled his eyes to adjust the bulb when it sparked. Hot fire burned through his hand and he swore, backing away from it. He looked up, frowning. Was that... Will? Was he trying to communicate again? Why did it have to hurt?

Then again, the times his mom had said it was Will on the phone, it had been fried, so it made some sense.

"Are you okay?" Nancy asked, coming over to him.

He looked down at his hand. His palm was red and irritated, but it wasn't like the marks he'd seen on his cousin. He didn't think it was that bad, though it certainly stung right now. "I think so. Maybe some ice..."

"I'll go," she said, running toward the house.

He glanced back at his hand and up at the light. "Will? Was that..."

you? Were you trying to tell me something? Did you take the rifle?"

He wondered if he was crazy, trying to talk to his brother like this. He shook his head, going back to the bench and looking around for anything else that might help. He pulled open the drawer with his good hand and stopped. What the hell?

"Okay, so you didn't have any ice but there was this frozen pack of peas and... Jonathan?"

He pointed to the drawer. "I have no idea where that came from. I mean, Dad, he has one. Maybe more. I've seen it. He might even have had it the day he showed up here, but it would have gone up with his car if he did, so... I don't know what this means."

"Give me your hand," Nancy said, pressing the peas into it before she studied the drawer. "Okay. So... there's a handgun in there. And you swear you didn't know it was there?"

"I'm not the only one who uses this shed, though I have to admit, I don't see my mom putting it in here—not unless, like I said, she took it from my dad but he'd been gone for a long time before that day—and how would Will get his hands on a gun?"

"I don't know, but it has to be better than going off on our own without one, right?"

"We don't have any bullets for it."

"We can fix that," she said, and he knew she was right. They just had to buy some ammunition, and that wouldn't be too hard to do in Hawkins at hunting season. As long as she had money because he was flat broke again. "What worries me now is your hand."

"It's not that bad a burn," he said, refusing to let it be when Barb and Will were still out there, when this thing was still out there and his mom and Hopper were looking in the wrong direction. "Let's go."

"Lucas, are you all right?" Dustin asked, knowing full well he wasn't but still having to ask. He ran toward his friend, needing to make sure he was breathing. This was insane. Cool, wicked cool because

Eleven had made Lucas fly, but bad, so bad because he hit his head and wasn't moving. "Lucas. Lucas, come on. Lucas, wake up."

He knew he was begging. He wasn't alone. Mike was doing the same thing next to him.

"Lucas, please."

"Come on, Lucas."

"Why would you do that?" Mike turned around and demanded of Eleven. "What's wrong with you? What is wrong with you?"

"Come on, wake up," Dustin said, focusing on Lucas. Yelling at Eleven wasn't going to make anything better. And seriously, why did Mike *think* she'd done it? She was trying to protect him. This whole thing was so stupid and messed up. "Come on. Lucas, Lucas, come on!"

Lucas' eyes opened and he started moving again.

"Lucas, you okay?" Dustin asked. "How many fingers am I holding up? Lucas, how many fingers?"

Mike tried to help him. "Let me see your head."

Lucas shoved him back. "Get off of me!"

"Lucas, let me see."

"Get off of me!" Lucas repeated, about to push past them when he stopped. Dustin was afraid he was about to go after Eleven or something, but he just stood there. A second later, Dustin saw what had stopped him.

Standing next to the weirdo was a guy in a long trench coat who looked very, very pissed off.

"You might want to listen to your friends. Head wounds aren't anything to fuck around with, trust me on that."

"Yeah?" Lucas asked. "And what do you know about it? Just who the

hell are you?”

Eleven looked up at him, her eyes wide and full of what Dustin could only call awe. “Brother.”

34. Chapter 34

Summary for the Chapter:

After finding Veronica, Hop searches the woods.

Jonathan and Nancy prepare for their hunt. Nine argues with the boys and Eleven. Hop and Joyce visit Terry Ives.

Notes for the Chapter:

So... I um... changed some more stuff. There is still a point to the older stuff... I've got plans for it but the present has been the main focus lately.

Also... I love that Nancy is a badass. Really. It's great. It's also somewhat unbelievable, in that she can just pick up a gun and be a crack shot just like that, and so I tweaked that just a little.

And Nine really refused to cooperate.

On a mostly unrelated note, why does every song on the radio make me want to cry right now?

October 13

"How's she doing?" Hop asked from the table, and Joyce sighed, going to her coffeepot and filling herself up a cup. He must have made it. She had no idea when, but she wasn't sure how long she'd sat with her niece after Hop brought her back to them. Jonathan had offered to sit up, but she told him to go back to bed if he could, since he had school in the morning.

She had to work, but she always did. She'd manage somehow.

She was just glad Hop had found Veronica.

"Asleep," Joyce said, sitting down across from him. "I don't understand, Hop. I thought... We talked about getting her into school, and she seemed to be almost looking forward to it. She was supposed to start tomorrow. I got her notebooks and everything. It was a good night. And then... this."

"It happens," Hop said. "We all have good and bad days."

"But to be out there in the rain? And you said she thought she killed someone..."

Hop grimaced. "She's probably just feeling guilty for surviving the fire. Lots of the guys I knew in 'Nam... they felt the same way because their buddies came home in body bags if they made it back at all. It's... it happens."

"Hop—"

"I'll check the woods in the morning, see if I find any sign of anyone else out there just to make sure she's sure of that," Hop said. "I just don't see any point in going back out there in that rain. Getting her inside, yeah. That was worth it. She was pretty damned cold when I found her. Weird thing about that storm."

Joyce nodded, sipping from her coffee. "I don't remember them saying it was supposed to rain. We would have moved Chester if they had. He has a house, but I just feel so bad leaving him in nothing but that for a whole night. Will doesn't help. He always wants him in to sleep with him if he can find an excuse for it."

"He's not an outdoor only dog?"

"Not really. More so since he spooked Veronica, though she seems fine with him now. And he really seemed like he wanted to find her when I first untied him."

"Joyce, he's a dog."

"Dogs are loyal creatures," she said. "Unlike people."

"You better be talking about Lonnie," Hop said, and she grimaced. While Hop had been a bit of an idiot back then, she knew it wasn't

his disloyalty that was a problem. It was jealousy and the usual teenage stupidity on both sides. "You should get some sleep, you know."

"I know, but... I'm pretty awake now, and it's only a little bit before I have to go into work..."

Hop shook his head. "You've been up all night, and I'd win easy money betting you're working a double. Go sleep. I'll be here for a while yet. Gotta wait for that weather to clear, after all, and even then, I don't—you still think you'll send her to school?"

"Oh, God," Joyce said, reaching for her cigarettes. She lit one up and sighed. "I don't know that I can, not after last night, but how do I leave her alone again? This... I don't understand. Why can't she catch a break? She was going to have enough on her plate with a new school. She didn't need this."

Hop grunted. "Don't have any answer to that. I wish to hell I knew, though. Couldn't get answers to that for my own life."

Joyce winced, thinking of all he'd lost. A daughter. A wife. She shouldn't have asked him out here in the middle of the night. "Hop, you don't have to stay."

"It's my job," he said. "Now you go on to bed."

Hop almost regretted giving Joyce his word that he'd stick around and clear the damned woods. He hadn't gotten much sleep when she woke him and he drove out, and a few hours sitting around that rickety table of hers waiting for the weather to improve hadn't helped any. He was sore and ready for his own bed.

He would go as soon as he was done checking these woods. Whatever the girl thought she'd killed, he'd either find it—he was hoping animal at most, confusion at best—or there'd be nothing to find. He just had to look for it. He didn't figure it would take long, not when most of him was sure she hadn't done anything last night but scare herself.

He heard a rustling in the trees and looked around, but he didn't see whatever bird or squirrel must have made it, so he shrugged it off and went on. The ground was still pretty wet after last night's downpour, but it was easy enough to navigate. He was fine, just tired and maybe a little grumpy.

Still, he was going to do this. Joyce had been completely run down when he saw her, worried out of her mind, and he didn't want either her or her niece thinking there was some reason to fear the woods or the truth.

Veronica hadn't killed anyone. He didn't see it. Maybe if her life was threatened, she could, but even then it was a hard sell. She was a bit too wounded right now, though he wouldn't be surprised if the same kind of strength that Joyce had, the kind that kept her going despite the shit that life threw at her, was in that niece of hers, too.

They might share a lot more than looks. He wouldn't be surprised at all. He saw a lot of that in Jonathan, as little as he knew the boy, because he was in a similar position to Joyce back as a teen, taking care of her like she'd been caring for her parents. Joyce wasn't as much of a burden as her parents had been—her mom bedridden and her father barely going through the motions.

Hop shook his head. It didn't do any good to think about that. The past was gone, and he couldn't fix their present any more than he could have helped Joyce much back then. Nowadays he knew where he'd gone wrong, and he would have liked to have done better, but then he'd never have met Diane or had Sara, and for all that hurt, it was still worth it.

He'd loved that girl with all he had, and he knew she was the best part of him, far better and smarter than he'd ever be.

He rounded another group of trees, shaking his head as he did. This was pretty damned pointless. There wasn't anything out here at all. No animals, no bodies, no nothing. Veronica had just managed to get spooked somehow, and it was sad, but not unusual. He understood it better than most, having seen plenty of men in Vietnam with similar reactions. Others were far less forgiving.

That was a small town for you. It was both the best and the worst place to be at any given moment. Quieter, safer, it was almost idyllic except for those same qualities lent themselves to everyone knowing your business, a lack of privacy, and people who knew you all your life thinking they could judge you. Too many of them had nothing better to do, and that was trouble.

He shook his head, taking out a cigarette and lighting it up. He'd circle around once more, but he was done. There was nothing out here.

November 11

"You're supposed to hit the cans, right?" Nancy asked, watching Jonathan miss every shot he took. She wasn't sure if that was his trauma over killing that bunny or if it was his hand and that was a lot worse than he'd admitted to earlier.

"No, actually, you see the spaces in between the cans? I'm aiming for those."

"Ah," she said, smiling at his lame joke. "Maybe we should try this a different way."

He nodded, passing her the gun and nodding to the box of bullets. Good thing they'd gotten a few of them, seeing as he'd missed a lot already, and she probably wouldn't be much better. She could almost guarantee that she wouldn't hit anything, either.

"It probably doesn't help, thinking about Thumper."

He gave her a look. "That's not fair and you know it. You try picturing one of those cans as a rabbit."

"No thank you," Nancy said. She knew she was preparing to shoot something, and if she was any good at this, she'd use it against the monster, but that was different. She hated that thing. It had scared her, taken Barb and Will—it might even have killed them. That made her angry.

She took aim and fired at the first can. Not surprisingly, she missed. "Damn it."

"It's not like it's easy," Jonathan said. "I thought it might be easier, since I'd done it before, but it isn't."

She nodded, trying again. The bullet clipped the can, coming close enough to rattle it but not knock it down. "Great."

"You're getting better," Jonathan said, and she gave him a look. "At least you don't have my dad lecturing you. He didn't exactly believe in positive reinforcement."

"Your dad is an ass."

"No argument here," Jonathan said. "I try to tell myself he can't be all that bad. It's not like... I guess he and my mother loved each other at some point, but I wasn't around for that part."

"Or maybe it wasn't about love at all," Nancy said. "Could just have been sex."

"Thanks a lot for that. I didn't really need to think that about my parents, okay?"

Nancy shrugged. "I don't think my parents ever loved each other."

He studied her. "They must've married for some reason."

"My mom was young. My dad was older, but he had a cushy job, money, came from a good family," Nancy said, lining up another shot. "So they bought a nice house at the end of the cul-de-sac and started their nuclear family."

"Screw that."

She didn't know why she was so pleased that he felt the same way about that. "Yeah. Screw that."

She pulled the trigger, and it hit the can with a satisfying smack. She looked over at him in triumph, and they shared a smile. Maybe they might actually stand a chance against this thing now.

“Brother?” Mike asked, his eyes wide as he tried to understand. El had never mentioned family, never said she had anyone, and this couldn't be happening, right? That guy... he must have been hiding in the junkyard, and he had come out to scare them, which was bad because he knew about El and what she could do, but she didn't seem to care about that.

“You're Nine, aren't you?” Lucas asked, completely disgusted. “She lied about that, too.”

The guy in the trench coat reached into his pocket, taking out a cigarette and lighting it with a Zippo before flipping it shut and putting it back in his pocket. He took a drag and let it out.

“You are a fire mage.”

“Shut up, Dustin.”

“No, you shut up. If this guy is who we think he is, Lucas, do you really want to piss him off? I mean, think about what El just did. And Nine is Will's fire mage. Look at him. We do not want him mad at us.”

“We don't want him period,” Mike said. “We were doing just fine—”

“Does delusional behavior run in your family or is it just you and your sister?” Nine asked, taking another drag. “She at least had the big hair to distract her, but you? Not sure what you have except stupidity.”

“Hey,” Mike said, frowning. He looked at El, and she tugged on the guy's coat.

He turned and pointed his cigarette at her. “Don't even get me started on you. I am supposed to be stopping a couple of noble idiots from going after a monster, not having a chat with your dumb friends.”

“They wanted the gate.”

“Oh, fuck no,” Nine said. “No way in hell.”

"You know where the gate is?" Lucas asked. "Tell us. Now."

Nine gave him a long, hard look. "You really think you can give me orders? That's cute. Stupid, but a little funny, maybe."

"You won't hurt them," Eleven said. "They are my friends."

"Friends? Oh, look at the pet project being completely naïve," Nine said, rubbing Eleven's head and making her pull away from him like she might just throw him into the bus behind him. "Go ahead. Try it. I'm not like them. I'll fight back."

Eleven bit her lip, looking from them to him again. "I helped you. Told you about her."

"And for that, your friends aren't crispy critters, but don't think I owe you anything. At least not anything good," Nine warned her. "You were his favorite, you know. You were the special one. I was the failure, and you know what it means to fail him."

Eleven gulped. "He hurt you."

"No, it tickled."

Dustin snorted, and both Lucas and Mike looked at him. "What? The guy's a jerk, but he's kind of funny, too."

Mike shook his head. Unbelievable. He focused on Nine again. "Can you help us find the gate or not?"

"I think he already answered that question," Lucas muttered. "Neither of them will help us."

Nine rolled his eyes. "Look, if you want to die, be my fucking guest. There's only one place that gate would be, and that's right dead center of the lab."

"Hawkins Lab?"

"Well, they'd have the power that Mr. Clarke said they'd need," Dustin said. "They could do it. They're Department of Energy."

“Government,” Nine said. “With soldiers and agents and you’d be dead before you got close to it. Have fun with that. I have things to do.”

Eleven caught his coat, and he glared at her.

“Let go.”

She shook her head. “You can get in.”

“I told you—fuck no. I am not going back there, not unless it’s to burn the whole thing down, and as tempting as that might be, it doesn’t solve shit. Now if you don’t mind, I have to get shallow girl and Jonathan out of harm’s way before one or both of them dies to the demogorgon.”

“The demogorgon is real?” Dustin asked, sounding almost excited.

“Dude, it is so not real,” Lucas said. “You’re all idiots, trusting either of them. She lied. We know she lied. And he’s an asshole.”

“Lucas—”

“Don’t Lucas me. Did she or did she not tell us there was no Nine? Now there is, and he’s a jerk, but you want to trust him with Will and our lives?”

“Um, he sort of refused to help us,” Dustin said. “So technically we’re not trusting him with much of anything.”

“Friends help,” Eleven told Nine. “People do things... help... because it’s the right thing to do.”

“We’re freaks made in a lab. There’s nothing right about us,” Nine told her. He took her hand and pried it off his coat. “And I am helping, just not here. I have to go find the others before they get themselves killed.”

“What about Will? He’s been in the Upside Down for days. He needs us—you—more than Jonathan does,” Mike said. “We have to get to him. That was why we were looking for the gate. And if we can’t use the gate—”

"I say he's lying," Lucas said. "If she's not screwing with our compasses, we'll find the gate, and we can get Will out. We can do that. And we don't have any proof he can do anything. He used a lighter for that cigarette. He's no fire mage."

Nine snorted. "I don't want to be your fire mage. And any use of my fire around here is like asking the lab to come shoot me. I don't think so."

"Please," Eleven said. "I can find Will. You can get him out. We can do it together."

"You never said what I was saying," Nancy began as they walked through the woods. Jonathan frowned, looking back at her. He'd outpaced her a couple times already, just because he was taller than her, and he had to stop doing that or they'd get separated and bad things would happen. He definitely did not want to be that far from the gun.

"What?"

"Yesterday," Nancy prompted. "You said I was saying something and that's why you took my picture."

He hadn't actually said that about her, specifically, but his own words had trapped him anyway. He wasn't sure why she was asking when Steve and the others had made it pretty obvious. He'd taken her picture because he liked her. Because he was an idiot. That much everyone should know. He had to say something, though.

"Oh, uh, I don't know. I guess I saw this girl, you know, trying to be someone else. But for that moment it was like you were alone, or you thought you were. And, you know, you could just be yourself."

She stopped, staring at him. "That is such bullshit."

Was it really? He didn't know that he was completely wrong about it. She'd been unguarded in that moment, no longer thinking about what she had to do to impress Steve. She wasn't Nancy being what she thought Steve Harrington wanted to see. She was just being Nancy.

“What?”

“I am not trying to be someone else,” Nancy said. “Just because I’m dating Steve and you don’t like him—”

“You know what? Forget it,” he muttered. “I just thought it was a good picture.”

“He’s actually a good guy.”

This was so not a subject he wanted to discuss. He should never have taken it or told Nancy about his plan to come out here and do this, even if her friend was missing, too. “Okay.”

“The other day, with the camera—He’s not like that at all. He was just being protective.”

Jonathan snorted. “Yeah, that’s one word for it.”

“Oh, and I guess what you did was okay?”

He shook his head. He had never claimed that it was. “No, I I never said that.”

“He had every right to be pissed—”

“No, *you* had a right to be pissed. The picture was of you. He doesn’t own you, and he wasn’t acting out of some noble protective instinct. He was jealous. That’s it. And even he wasn’t, if it was what you think—Does that mean I have to like him?”

“No.”

“Listen, don’t take it so personally, okay? I don’t like most people,” Jonathan told her, starting walking again. “He’s in the vast majority.”

“You know, I was actually starting to think that you were okay.”

He found that hard to believe. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, I was thinking, ‘Jonathan Byers, maybe he’s not the pretentious creep everyone says he is.’”

Pretentious creep? That was a new one for him. “Well, I was just starting to think you were okay.”

“Oh.”

“I was thinking, 'Nancy Wheeler, she's not just another suburban girl who thinks she's rebelling by doing exactly what every other suburban girl does until that phase passes and they marry some boring one-time jock who now works sales, and they live out a perfectly boring little life at the end of a cul-de-sac. Exactly like their parents, who they thought were so depressing, but now, hey, they get it.'”

He walked away and left her there. She really was wasted on Steve Harrington, but if she didn't want to see it, he really didn't need to put himself through this.

He heard a nagging voice in his head, one that sounded a lot like Veronica, telling him that maybe this was what he really needed, a chance to get over Nancy once and for all.

Joyce followed Hop up to the door, hoping they were doing the right thing. She wasn't sure if they'd made the right choice, coming here over any other option, and she was worried about leaving Jonathan behind. She didn't know that he would stay at home, as responsible as he was, not with his brother and cousin out there, missing. She couldn't believe she was here herself, not when she couldn't guarantee it would help them at all.

What if they were wasting valuable time? Even if this thing connected to the lab, that didn't mean that Terry Ives could tell them anything.

The door opened and a woman peered out, frowning. “Can I help you?”

“Hi, we're looking for Terry Ives,” Joyce said. “Does she live here?”

“Who's asking?”

Hop took out his badge and held it up. “The Hawkins chief of police.”

“And you want to talk to my sister?”

Hop nodded. “Well, if your sister's Terry Ives, then, yeah, we do.”

“Okay, well, you can come in, but if you want Terry to tell you anything, you're about five years too late,” the woman said, letting them inside. She started down the hall. Joyce looked at Hop, and he gave her a quick shrug.

The television was on, playing some game show or other. “Terry, you have some visitors.”

Joyce looked at the woman in the chair, trying to find words. She had no idea what they were doing. “Hello. My name's Joyce Byers. Uh, this is Hopper. We drove over from Hawkins. Um, you see, uh, my son he's been missing for almost a week now, and, um, we were wondering if we could talk to you about your daughter, Jane? If there's anything that you could tell us about when she was taken?”

The woman didn't answer, just kept rocking in her chair, mumbling to herself.

“What was your relationship with Dr. Brenner?” Hop asked. “You guys keep in touch?”

Still nothing from the woman in the chair. Joyce took the flyer out of her pocket and held it out to Terry. “This is, uh, this is him. This is Will. Uh, you may have seen him on on the news.”

Terry Ives continued to rock in the chair, her eyes on the television screen but not like she was watching it. She didn't seem to be seeing anything at all.

“Uh...”

Hop turned to Terry's sister. “What's wrong with her?”

“I told you—you're wasting your time.”

Great, Joyce thought. Just what they were afraid of.

"I never said I was doing anything with you," Nine said, and Eleven bit her lip. He was being a mouthbreather. She had been all excited to see him in person, though the others had missed him appearing as he did. He'd come from nowhere. That was awesome, as her friends would say. Only he wasn't awesome after he started talking.

"Please, brother. Will needs us."

"Don't call me that," Nine said. "You and I—we are not the same."

"Papa hurt you," she said, taking his hand. "He hurt all of us. Lied to all of us. Made us do things. I thought I was alone. Then Mike found me, but you... you said you would help me then. Why not now?"

"That was different."

She shook her head. "Not different. Same. You said you could help. You can help. You can get Will. You can save him."

"This is stupid. He's not going to help. He's probably not even what you think he is. Some random guy shows up—he was probably waiting for us in the bus—and you assume he's not only the fire mage but she thinks he's her brother. And sure, he talks a good game, but he didn't do anything. The only fire he made was with a lighter. He can't travel between worlds. He can't even light a cigarette on his own. All he's done is smoke and insult us, and yeah, it might seem like a good trick, but it's just that. A trick."

"I don't have to prove anything to you," Nine said. "I have things I should be doing."

"If we save Jonathan, then you save Will?"

Nine looked at her. "You don't know what you're asking."

Eleven thought about that. He seemed to think he had a good reason for refusing to help, and she didn't believe that. They needed him, and he should help, even if he was a mouthbreather. He was just hurting, as Papa had hurt her, but different.

She closed her eyes, reaching out to his mind, wanting to talk to him alone.

The world was red, not dark, but as she stepped toward him, she could hear the familiar sound of water, feel it underneath her feet. The darkness there was the same, like their two minds had merged the meeting place, both of them adding a piece to it. His was the red.

Hers was darkness.

"Now I'm really pissed at you, just so you know."

"Tell me," she said. "Why won't you help Will?"

He snorted. "I am not a hero out to save the universe. All I want is to be left alone. Well, and Veronica and Slushie."

"Slushie?"

"My hamster. Just... get out of my head before I make you get out."

"Not before you tell me why you won't help. Are you a bad man like Papa?"

"Few people are as fucked up as Papa is," he said. He looked away. "You know when you get out of this and you'll find your nose bleeding. Your head will hurt. You know that pain. The cost of doing what we can do."

"Yes."

"How much did it hurt the night you opened the gate and let that thing in from the other world?"

She stared at him in fear. "You know?"

"It was different before that night. No dark place, no dead world. Just mine," he said. "And when I saw you free that night, I had a feeling it was you that did that. They don't know, do they, those friends of yours? That you opened the gate?"

"Are you going to tell them?"

"I could."

"Please."

He turned back to look at her. "That depends on you. If you keep pushing me to do what you want, what those boys want, then I will. I choose what I do now. No one else does. I do things for Veronica, but she does not make my decisions. I am good or bad because of what I decide, not what anyone else does."

"You could help Will."

"I don't fucking know where he is," Nine said. "I can get anywhere I want to in our world. I can find Jonathan and Nancy here. I don't know that I can do that with Will. I have next to no control over things in the dark world."

"Upside Down."

"I am not fucking calling it that."

She grimaced. "If I find Will, you could take us there."

"And the demogorgon?"

"I don't know."

He shook his head. "Look, that thing kills. As long as it doesn't know where Will is, he'll survive. He can make it. Jonathan and Nancy are going right for it, and it will kill them. Them first. Maybe Veronica's aunt next. I'm not sure she's in danger, but she probably is, going for someone tied to the lab like she is."

"Hurt her?"

"Yeah."

"I can help. Tell you if she needs you. Find Will."

"I don't want your help. Now get out of my head."

"What is going on?" Mike asked. He looked worried, watching El like he wanted to go grab her and take her away from Nine, but he'd better not. That would be bad. Dustin was sure of that, just like he knew what was happening here.

“Dude,” Dustin said, almost bouncing with excitement. “I think they're talking in their minds. Like Professor X.”

Lucas rolled his eyes, shaking his head. “Don't be stupid. They are not talking in their heads. This is just a really creepy staring contest. I don't even know why I'm still standing here. This is ridiculous, and you're all idiots for trusting her.”

Mike frowned at him. “Lucas, they both said going to the gate wasn't safe. And if he is Nine, I think we can all see why she lied about him. He's a jerk.”

“He's not even Nine.”

“I'm stopping this,” Mike said, taking a step toward Eleven. He went over to her and tugged on her arm, trying to get her to look at him. “El, please. Look at me. Come on. Leave him alone. We need to go. We'll find some other way to do this. We can still get Will, right? You said you could find him.”

“Mike, leave it,” Lucas said. “Neither one of them is going to help us. We should never have trusted her in the first place. She probably made up the whole thing about the other world and that whole Will on the radio? Ventriloquism. That's all it was. Just a big fucking lie.”

“No. He was there. He is alive,” Mike insisted. “We heard him. We believed it. We're going to find him. We are.”

“Mike,” Dustin said, frustrated. He was still relying way too much on El, and this thing between him and Lucas was going to blow up again any minute now. “You need to shake.”

“What?”

“You know the rules. You drew first blood.”

“No way,” Mike said. “This is Lucas' fault. He was way out of line.”

“The hell I was. You are. And she is. Listen to yourself, Mike. Really listen.”

“No, both of you listen,” Dustin said. “All three of you were being a

bunch of little assholes. I was the only reasonable one. I still am the only reasonable one. Bottom line, though, Mike, you pushed first. You know the rule.”

“No,” Mike said. “No way. I’m not shaking his hand.”

“You’re shaking his hand.”

Lucas scoffed, and Mike glared at him, coming back like he just might start the fight again.

“No, I’m not.”

“This isn’t a discussion,” Dustin told him. “This is the rule of law. Obey or be banished from the party. Do you wanna be banished?”

Grumpily, Mike answered, “No.”

“Good,” Dustin said, and he was about to make them shake when the others moved.

“Fuck,” Nine said, putting a hand to his head and wiping under his nose. “Don’t ever do that again. I mean it. Stay the fuck out of my head.”

“El,” Mike said. “Come with us. We need to—”

“No,” she said. “I’m going with my brother.”

Nine snorted. “I never said you were going anywhere with me.”

“You can’t go with him,” Mike said. “We can’t trust him, and he refused to help Will. He’s a bad guy, El. Just like the ones you’re scared of.”

“Oh, hell no,” Nine said. “You did not just say that.”

“Seriously, Mike, that was probably the worst thing you could have said,” Dustin told him. “Look, tempers are really high right now. Everyone’s being an asshole except me, but we can just calm down and figure this out. If we can’t get to the gate the other way—”

“We need to hurry,” El told Nine. “Save them.”

“Let go of my coat.”

She shook her head. “I can help. I want to go with you.”

“No,” Mike said, completely losing it again. “You’re not taking her. You’re just not.”

Lucas groaned, and Dustin shook his head, not sure why Mike was getting protective when the guy had clearly said he wasn’t taking her, but he still went toward them to stop it. A wall of fire leapt up in front of him, making him fall back as he skidded to a stop.

“Whoa,” Lucas said, staring in disbelief.

“He really is a fire mage,” Dustin said. “Awesome.”

The fire died down, and Dustin was a bit disappointed, but then he blinked and swallowed and tried to understand what he was seeing. Or, really, *not* seeing.

Lucas shook his head. “They’re just hiding on the bus.”

“El?” Mike asked, getting up and running onto the bus. “El? El, where are you? El!”

35. Chapter 35

Summary for the Chapter:

A few things are seen in the light of day.

Joyce and Hop get frustrated by their investigation, Nancy and Jonathan find too much, and Veronica has an unsettling dream.

Notes for the Chapter:

I almost hate to do a "I wrote this instead of sleeping" thing, but I did. I have an early shift, I should be sleeping, I couldn't. Stupid nagging ideas. I figured out I had to toss the Barb & Veronica scene I wrote and knew the order for the scenes, which forced me up and into the document, and this is the result.

I am so going to pay for this tomorrow. *sigh*

I mean, today. Ugh. I have less than an hour before I have to leave for work. Ugh. I am such an idiot. Idiot with insomnia, bad combination.

October 13

The one called Hopper didn't hurt Veronica.

The aunt fussed and fretted and seemed to care a lot about her. Even the older boy was worried. The younger one was a bit grumpy, but he was starting to think that was the child's default state, like all that kid knew was grumpy.

He wanted to get inside and see Veronica, but he knew he couldn't, especially not after last night. He'd stuck close, watching in case the

people from the lab came back, though he'd fallen asleep for part of the time, against his will.

He knew he was lucky. They both were. He didn't know why the lab hadn't gone after everyone in the house, but he knew they could easily have found him when he was asleep, and that would have been it for him.

And Veronica. She was only useful as bait, right?

He grimaced, not liking the thought at all. He couldn't let them kill her, and he couldn't let them catch him. He really should have just taken her away, but he didn't want to do it if she wanted her family. He'd made that mistake before, though he'd only wanted his hamster to have a safe place.

He grimaced. He didn't know that Slushie was safe with Funshine, but he knew that he couldn't have Slushie here. He was running around too much to keep his hamster safe. He'd probably have forgotten to feed him or worse after all he'd done here in Hawkins.

He would get the hamster back, if he could. He just had to find a way to finish this with Veronica. If he could just talk to her, that would make the difference, but he couldn't go inside, even if he knew her family was gone to school and work and the policeman was looking in the woods.

He had to wait until the policeman was gone to do his own search, though he had to think what he'd done, clumsy as it was, had worked, at least enough to confuse them for a bit. They couldn't prove that he'd been there, and without that, he supposed they'd have to leave Veronica alive to try again, wouldn't they?

He grimaced. He'd have to go get some food and maybe something else that would make it nicer to sleep here, though he needed to be watchful if he was here. He had to know if the lab would make a move on Veronica again.

Last night hadn't been planned. If it had been, then they would have been organized, took him and left her for dead.

Maybe that was the point of the drugs last night, enough to make her sleep and die out in the cold, not that it had been as cold as it got until after he made it rain.

He shook his head. He should have done something else, but at least he knew now that he'd done enough to keep them both safe for a few more hours.

He had to make sure that turned into days. Forever, for Veronica. No one could ever hurt her again.

Will gave his cousin another doubtful look, thinking she looked a lot like when she first came, all drugged up and stuff, even if they said she wasn't on any. She just kept staring out at the backyard, and it was super creepy again.

He really didn't know why she had to stay here. Why would she even have gone out last night? It was raining, right? So it was totally stupid. No one should have gone out in that.

He watched her put her hand to the window and sigh, talking to herself again. She moved away and curled up on her bed, her new notebook in her arms.

Will grimaced, turning away to hear Chester barking at him outside. He grimaced. He was late feeding the guy again, poor dog, and he wasn't usually that bad about it. He remembered most days, but then today had been weird since before school, with Hopper sitting in their kitchen drinking coffee and his mom explaining the whole story.

He wouldn't be surprised if Veronica had killed someone.

He went out the back door, walking around to feed Chester. He poured the food into the dog's bowl, giving him a pat on the head. Chester whined at him, and he sighed.

"I have homework, and aren't you tired from being out all night? Mom said she lost you in the woods for a bit."

Chester barked. Will studied him, thinking.

“Do you know where she was? Did she really kill somebody?”

Chester whined again, and Will shrugged. Jonathan was working, much as his mom might hate that, and she'd be back late herself, so no one would know if he took the dog on a bit of a walk. It wasn't like Veronica was in any state to tell even if she did see him.

He untied Chester and wrapped the rope around his hand, letting the dog lead him through the woods. He barked in excitement, tugging Will forward. They looped through the trees, and Will was starting to regret his decision to bring Chester out here, as the dog was running too fast, sure to get them lost, and he was already breathing hard.

He tripped over a tree root and cursed, grumbling to himself as he did. He sat, rubbing his shin, and then his eyes caught on something metal.

He crawled toward it, pushing past the leaves from the branch that looked like it could have come down last night, uncovering a gun.

No way. Since when did Veronica have a gun?

No, Will was assuming too much. No matter how weird his cousin was, she'd come to their house with nothing. She wore his mom's clothes. She didn't have a gun, and his mom wouldn't have gotten one or anything. This wasn't Veronica's.

So how did it get here?

Well, Hopper had a gun. He was the police chief. Could he have left it here last night? Really? Will picked it up and frowned, not sure what to do with it. He could always ask Hopper about it later, he supposed.

He tugged on Chester's rope. “Come on, boy. Back to the house.”

November 11

“El,” Mike repeated, searching each seat on the bus in desperation, not finding any sign of her anywhere. He didn't understand. That

wasn't possible. She should still be here. Even if that creep had lit her on fire, he couldn't have killed her and turned her body to ash that fast. She should still be alive.

Okay, sure, she'd look a lot like Luke's aunt and uncle in Star Wars, maybe, but even that was too much to think of. Maybe as burned as Veronica had been?

Damn, had that guy done that to her?

"Mike," Lucas said from the door. "She's gone. They're both gone."

"No. It's not possible."

"Dude, it is totally possible, because we just watched it happen," Dustin said. "He's the fire mage. He made flames, and he disappeared. It was like... magic."

Lucas shook his head, giving him a dirty look. "Really? That's the best you could do?"

Dustin shrugged. "It was really cool, okay? Like, amazing. The stuff El can do is awesome, but it's a little less... I don't know, showy? She did set a fire once, but it wasn't on purpose. He did, and he used it to vanish like in the movies. He totally gets props for showmanship."

Mike shook his head. "He does not. He doesn't get anything. He took El."

"Um, were we the only ones paying attention there? What is with you, Mike? You seriously are delusional," Lucas said. "She wanted to go with him. He told her no. More than once."

"He put up a wall of fire to keep us from getting close to him."

"Because you were about to fight him like a big idiot," Lucas said. "I don't even know why I'm bothering. You can't see the truth about that girl when it's right in front of your face."

Mike glared at him.

"Lucas is right. I don't think he put up the wall to keep you from El. I

think he did it since he knew you were about to fight him. He just wanted to leave, and I guess that meant taking her with him, but I don't think that he wanted it at all. She wanted to go."

Mike frowned. "This is all wrong. I should never have yelled at her. She wouldn't have gone with him if I hadn't yelled at her."

"Think whatever you want, Mike. You're going to do it no matter what we say," Lucas said. "I'm going home."

"What? When Will's still out there and El's with that guy? How can you go home now?"

"Again, the weirdo *wanted* to go with the creep," Lucas said, "and even if he was lying about where the gate is, the sun is going down. We don't have flashlights, and who knows how long we'd have to walk to get to that gate? I'm going to go home, eat dinner, and start fresh in the morning because it's the sane thing to do. You do whatever the hell it is you want to do. I don't care anymore."

"Lucas—"

"Let him go," Dustin advised. Mike sighed, not liking this at all. Their group was splintering, Lucas was being unreasonable, and he was worried about El. What if that guy really hurt her? Sure, she had powers, but so did he, and that fire had been so fast, so intense. He swore he'd almost been burned by it.

"I have to find her."

"Mike, she's not here anymore," Dustin said. "This wasn't an illusion at a magic show where he got you to look in one direction and had a trap door. There isn't one. There's nowhere they could have run in the time between when that wall went up and when it went down. It was seconds. Long enough for you to fall on your ass, but that's it. You fell, and it was gone. It was kind of disappointing, except... they were gone. He really can shadow walk."

Mike looked at his feet. "But he... he said he wouldn't help us."

"Maybe not," Dustin agreed. "But El's with him, remember? Maybe she can talk him into it. Or maybe she can find Will and another way

out. It's not over. Lucas is right. We can go look for the gate in the morning, but in a little bit, we won't be able to see shit, so we should go home."

Mike looked around the bus again. "I should have stopped them."

"You want something to drink? I mean, you did come an awful long way for nothing," the woman said, leading them down the hall. "I would have told you that if you'd called."

"We had an address," Joyce said. "Not a number."

"Right. I suppose that would be in my name."

"Which is?"

"Becky. Becky Ives. Never married," she said, gesturing for them to take a seat. "I'll tell you what I can, not sure that it'll be any help to you."

"At this point, we'll take just about anything," Hop admitted. He didn't want this to be a complete waste of time, not when Joyce had to be freaking out about her son and niece. She was worried, with every right to be, but there had to be a part of this here, he knew it. He just didn't know what it was.

Becky sat down and lit a cigarette. "She was a part of some study in college."

Hop thought back to the news article he'd read. "MK Ultra?"

Becky nodded. "Yeah, that's the one. Was, uh, started in the fifties. By the time Terry got involved, it was supposed to be ramping down, but the drugs just got crazier. Messed her up good."

They'd seen that for themselves just a minute ago. That woman was gone. "This was the CIA that ran this?"

Becky laughed at that, pointing her cigarette at him. "You and Terry would've gotten along. 'The Man,' with a big capital 'M.' They'd pay you know, a couple hundred bucks to people like my sister, give 'em

drugs, psychedelics. LSD, mostly. And then they'd strip her naked and put her in these isolation tanks."

Joyce frowned. "Isolation tanks?"

"Yeah. These big bathtubs, basically, filled with salt water, so you can float around in there. You lose any sense of, uh sense and feel nothing, see nothing... They wanted to expand the boundaries of the mind. Real hippie crap," Becky said, dismissing it, but then she probably only saw the negative effect it had on her sister.

Powell had thought it was hippie crap, too, but Hop never saw government and hippie in the same light. They didn't really have the same goals in mind. If the government had gotten people to expand their minds, they probably did it hoping for a weapon.

"I mean, it's not like they were forcing her to do any of this stuff," Becky said. "The thing is, though, is that she didn't know she was pregnant at the time."

"Jane," Joyce said. "Do you have any pictures of her?"

Becky frowned. "I don't think you guys understand. Terry miscarried in the third trimester."

Hop stared at her. There was no baby? None at all? That couldn't be right. He hadn't chased all this down for nothing. He knew the case had been dismissed, but none of the articles said it was because there was never a kid.

"You're sure?"

"Let me show you something else," Becky said, rising. She led them back down the hall and opened the other door. She gestured inside, and Hop reluctantly walked in, the paranoid part of him thinking it was some kind of trap set by the lab.

What if this woman wasn't even Terry Ives' sister?

Joyce stepped in and looked around in a bit of awe mixed with horror.

"She keeps all of this up," Becky said. "Been doing it for twelve years. Terry pretends like Jane is real, like she's gonna come home someday."

Hop touched the mobile, accidentally starting it and wincing when it played the same tune Sara's used to play.

"Says she's special. Born with 'abilities.'"

"Abilities?" Joyce asked, looking worried again, but Hop could hardly blame her after what they'd heard about Veronica's boyfriend.

"You read any Stephen King?" Becky asked, laughing. "You guys look scared, actually. I mean, it's all make believe."

Hop cleared his throat. "What what kind of abilities?"

"Telepathy, telekinesis," Becky answered. "You know, shit you can do with your mind. That's why the big, bad Man stole Jane away. Her baby's a weapon, off fighting the commies. The doctors all say it's a coping mechanism. You know, to deal with the guilt."

"Do you think there is any chance she could be telling the truth?" Hop asked. When he saw the look she gave him, he added, "About having had the kid."

Becky shook her head. "There is no birth certificate, nothing from the hospital. Doctors and nurses all confirm that she miscarried."

"Yeah, but that could've been covered up," Hop said, thinking it wouldn't have been that hard, not for someone with Brenner's resources. "Right?"

Becky smiled at him. "Like I said, you and Terry would've gotten along."

Jonathan had come to regret arguing with Nancy earlier. They'd been wandering for long enough in a tense, angry silence, and a part of him was ready to beg forgiveness even though he didn't think he was entirely wrong about her. Sure, he'd said a lot of it to hurt her. He hadn't meant to, not at first, but she'd pushed every button, trying to

convince him Steve was wonderful.

Jonathan knew he was jealous, he could admit that, but that didn't make everything he said wrong. It looked a lot like Nancy was picking Steve for all the reasons she hated her mom's choice, since Steve was probably going to end up working for his dad. He'd have that cushy job, he could afford the house on the cul-de-sac, and since he barely knew Nancy and probably saw only how pretty she could be, he would want her to be that same suburban housewife she despised.

He didn't know what Nancy should do with her life, but she'd said she didn't want that, so why was she chasing it? How did she manage to delude herself so far that she couldn't see what she was doing?

And damn it, why did he have to care?

She stopped, pulling on his arm.

He looked back at her, frowning. "What, are you tired?"

"Shut up."

He hadn't really said anything before, not since their fight. "What?"

"I heard something," she said, starting walking again. He followed her without saying anything, a bit worried they were getting too close to the road again. He didn't want her walking right out into a car, even if he was a bit frustrated with her.

"Oh, God," Nancy said, and Jonathan winced, looking down at the poor, whimpering deer. She was covered in blood, cuts all over her. He didn't even know how she'd made it this far from the road. "It's been hit by a car."

He knew that, too, and he felt for it. The deer deserved better.

"We can't just leave it," Nancy said, taking out the gun and pointing it at the deer.

He didn't want her to do it. He knew how he'd felt when he killed the rabbit, and he didn't want Nancy to have that guilt. He already did.

“I’ll do it.”

“I thought you said—”

“I’m not ten anymore,” he said, hoping he could convince himself as well. He pulled back the hammer, swallowing. He could do this. He wasn’t really hurting the deer. He was easing her pain, otherwise she would suffer for hours. That wasn’t right. He had to do this.

He was just about to pull the trigger when the deer was jerked away from them. It happened so fast he barely understood what he saw. Had that long silvery thing been an arm?

“What was that?”

He heard a strange noise, like the one his mom had described. They looked around, searching for it. He tried to find it to shoot it, but he couldn’t see anything.

“Where’d it go?”

He really didn’t like this. “I don’t know.”

She pointed the flashlight down at the ground, revealing the deer’s blood leading away from where it had been lying. They started following it without a word, but then the trail stopped out of nowhere.

Jonathan didn’t understand.

“Do you see any more blood?”

He shook his head again. “No.”

He turned in one direction, looking for more blood. That deer couldn’t just have vanished. It was in no state to move, so it hadn’t done it on its own. Something had taken it. The monster, whatever it was. That thing had the deer, but where was it?

He swept his flashlight over the ground, still not seeing anything. He turned around, realizing Nancy wasn’t with him anymore.

“Nancy?”

“I'm sorry I wasn't able to be more help,” Becky said, going to open the door for them, and Joyce nodded, still feeling a bit sick over the time they'd spent here, and for what? She couldn't help Will or Veronica with what they now knew.

They had only learned that that woman had gone mad over losing her child, and while Joyce could see the parallels, that could not be her. She had to keep herself together, had to find Will, had to find Veronica, had to be the mother Jonathan deserved.

“You humored us,” Hop said, about to leave, but then he stopped. “Wait. Your sister. She never... I don't know, chased other missing kids thinking they were like hers, did she?”

Becky frowned, folding her arms over her chest. “Why are you asking that?”

Hop shrugged. “We did basically the same thing, so I don't know why she wouldn't.”

Becky sighed. “It was another crazy, crackpot idea of hers, like the baby surviving when it didn't. She had this thought that if she found other kids like Jane, she could find her. It was crazy.”

Joyce found herself glaring at the other woman. “When your kid is missing and you can't prove it but you believe they're still alive out there, you'll chase any lead you can to find them, no matter how crazy or ridiculous it might seem. I know you think we're idiots for chasing your sister's story, but my boy is missing. My niece is missing. And I will do whatever it takes to get them back.”

Hop put a hand on her back, and she wanted to smile at the gesture despite how angry she was.

“Did she keep any records on those other kids she looked into?” Hop asked, again getting a frown from Becky. “There's a chance this relates to an older boy as well, one more around seventeen than twelve. I just thought maybe if this... if it's something more like a

sicko that takes kids, he probably did it before, right? And that could be in the information your sister has.”

Becky shrugged, turning back and walking into the other room. “She kept all of this, too. Everything from the lawsuit and her quest, as it was.”

“Why didn't you get rid of it after... after she ended up like she is?” Joyce asked, unable to help herself. She wanted to know why this woman would put up with all this “insanity” when her sister was clearly in no state to do anything about her getting rid of stuff.

Becky managed a small half-smile. “I guess there's this part of me that still hopes, you know? She'll come back and she'll want it all again. So I leave it where it is.”

She went over to a file cabinet, kneeling at the bottom drawer. She thumbed through the files and pulled out a couple folders. She checked one, set it to the side, and then flipped open the other. “Here. This is what she dug up. Kids she thought were like Jane.”

“Do you mind if we take this?” Hop asked. “I can make copies and get the original back to you.”

Becky looked back at the doorway and sighed. “Keep it. She won't ever be able to use it.”

Nancy stopped, needing to get a better look at the tree she'd almost walked past. She set her bag down and shined the flashlight inside, trying to make sense of it. That didn't look like tree. It was moving, pulsing. Almost like it was alive and beating, like an organ or something. She didn't understand.

Swallowing, she reached out to touch it, grimacing when her fingers came into contact with something gross and slimy. She gagged, but then her hand went through it, and she backed off, looking around the other side of the tree.

No, her hand wasn't coming out the other side. So where was that? What had she touched?

She steeled herself, forcing her hand through it again, following her hand with the rest of her, crawling out into another place. The woods, but not the ones she'd just left. The air was thick, and something drifted down like snow but it was not snow. Dead vines covered the whole ground, crisscrossing under her feet.

She almost jumped, hearing something ahead of her. She didn't know what that noise was, but she forced herself forward, needing to know what was out there. She came around another tree and stopped dead in horror, staring at that thing as it *ate* the deer.

The noise was it chewing. She felt so sick. She started to back away, but she stepped on a branch, and it looked up at her.

This was so much worse than it not having a face. The non-face had become flaps of skin flapping about, full of teeth, and she didn't want to know how fast that thing could eat her.

She turned and ran, screaming for help. Maybe Jonathan would hear her. Maybe he could find his way in. She didn't know. She wished she'd waited for him before going in, since he had the gun. She couldn't do anything to that thing.

“Nancy!”

“Jonathan, where are you?” Nancy called out, needing to find him before that thing caught her. She didn't know if it had eyes, if it could see her, but she had to keep running, not sure she dared hide. “Jonathan!”

“I'm right here!”

He was not right here. “Where are you? Jonathan!”

“I'm right here, Nancy,” Jonathan repeated. “Just follow my voice. Follow my voice.”

She did, listening to him coaching her from wherever he was, running back toward the original tree now, finding it pulsing again as she got closer. She needed to get through it, had to.

She heard a growl behind her and screamed, falling just in front of

the tree. She crawled back toward it, reaching her hands through to meet Jonathan's in desperation. She tried to pull herself through, but something caught hold of her foot.

Oh, God. This was it. This was when she died.

Then she heard a different kind of roar and looked back to see flames almost scorching her foot as they forced the monster away from her. They flared up as it tried to move, and she swallowed, staring in disbelief.

"Go," the kid in the trench coat said, sending another burst of flame toward the monster.

She didn't get to see it hit because Jonathan yanked her out, and she found herself trembling in his hold, shaking and unable to do anything but whimper as he spoke.

"I've got you."

He did, and she wanted to tell him not to let her go again, terrified she'd end up back in that place again. She didn't want to see it or that thing again. She tucked her head into Jonathan's coat and tried to calm herself.

They still had to get out of here.

"This is your daughter?" the old woman asked, frowning at Veronica and looking up at her mother. She wrinkled her nose, and Veronica was tempted to kick her. She didn't think much of this great aunt. She wasn't great at all. She was old and smelly. She didn't know why they had to be here at all. Her mom had said they had to, but her mom never took her anywhere else to see family before.

"Of course she is." Her mom sounded defensive. "Can't you see the resemblance?"

"To Joyce," Darlene said. "Not to you."

Veronica almost wanted to laugh at the look on her mom's face.

"You're a wicked child, aren't you?" the aunt asked. "You have a touch of mischief in you, even some malice."

"Don't talk that way to her." Her mom pulled her back from the old lady, like she was going to protect her, which was funny, really, because her mom couldn't even kill spiders in their kitchen. She called exterminators for that.

"Malice but heart," Darlene said, leaning in to Veronica's ear. "Trust me, child, you will need these things. You must be strong."

"I'm plenty strong. I'll even kick you and prove it."

Darlene laughed. "Oh, that's not necessary. Come. Let me tell you a story."

Veronica shrugged, following her over to the rocking chair. She could put up with one book if she had to, and then they could go.

"Do you know who I am?"

"My great aunt."

"The crazy one," Darlene said. She lowered her voice. "I am not the crazy one. I am the one that sees too much. Ever since then, I have seen too much. I see it now. I see that world. The darkness. I see the death and decay. I see so much death... it surrounds you."

"Is every day Halloween for you?"

Darlene laughed. "Oh, were that it was only so simple. I wouldn't be insane. I'd be a witch, though that's no better. They'd burn me at the stake. As it is now, most of them pity me. See, once I was a little girl like you... and I found something I shouldn't have. Someplace I shouldn't have. The things in there were not like here. They were foreign. Dark. Evil."

"Your campfire stories need work."

"Perhaps this will help," her aunt said, picking up a book near the chair. She opened it up. "I had to draw it. Over and over, I drew it. I saw it. I saw what it wanted me to see."

Veronica looked at the drawing and frowned. "Is that a spider?"

"Much, much worse than a spider."

"It looks like a spider with too many legs. Is that why it's worse? Because that's kind of dumb, actually. If it had too many legs, it wouldn't move at all."

"You're a smart little girl. I hope you always remember to use that," Darlene said. "This is coming. It rules the dark place, but it wants more than that. It wants to make our world like that one. It will kill us all."

Veronica nodded. "Okay."

"No, listen," Darlene said, opening the book to another page. "This is it. This is the dark world. It looked like home, but it wasn't home. Everywhere I stepped was death and decay. I found it. It found you. I can see it all around you. Death."

"You already said that."

"You must be ready," Darlene said, taking out a piece of rope and stretching it from Veronica's head to her feet.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking measurements."

"For what?"

"Your coffin."

"Veronica. Veronica, wake up."

She forced her eyes open, confused. She looked around the room, felt the cool mattress underneath her hand, its emptiness telling her what she didn't want to know.

"He's still not back yet."

Barb shook her head. "No, but you seemed to be having a very unsettling dream. You even... I don't know. It was weird. I thought

you were having trouble breathing.”

“It wasn't...” Veronica put a hand to her head. “I was... almost reliving when I went to visit my great aunt. It was like it, but not like it. I'm not sure what was so different, just... I think she said other stuff, not what was in that dream. Or maybe I'm just remembering more. I'm not sure.”

“What happened?”

“She showed me a picture of something she saw in that other world. Something she said was coming for us.”

“That monster that took me and Will?”

Veronica shook her head. “No. Something much worse.”

36. Chapter 36

Summary for the Chapter:

Things get a little complicated after Nine intervenes for Nancy and Jonathan, while the others discuss things they've discovered.

Notes for the Chapter:

I was able to work in some plot for Steve, and I kind of like it.

And I forget everything else I meant to say.

And then remembered... the bit Joyce said is from one of the articles Becky shows Eleven in season two. I got as much as I could from it, though it wasn't much.

October 13

“Three guards killed themselves?” Connie asked, trying to understand just how stupid these people thought she was. She found it very hard to believe that three men had decided to kill themselves at the same time. That was the sort of conspiracy that she could create but didn't, as it was too stupid to be believed by anyone.

“Not exactly. We believe that the one, suffering from a blow to his head, got confused and ended up firing on his teammates when they went to locate him.”

She put a hand to her head, not sure this theory was any more acceptable than the last. “You believe that?”

“Well, it's the best we've come up with so far,” the other agent said defensively. She waited for him to explain, and he grimaced. “We

have the radio chatter and house audio surveillance from that night. The man with the head wound goes unresponsive and is never heard from after that point. Reynolds and Fields both attempted to make contact, but failed to. At one point, Fields encountered the girl and was ordered to sedate her. When she was later found by the policeman her aunt called, she apparently said she'd 'killed someone' and probably was responsible for hitting our man in the head. Then she was dosed by Fields according to protocol, and she's as confused as she was the night of the fire."

Connie was not surprised to hear the girl was confused. That was exactly how they wanted her, at least until Nine showed himself. Afterward, she was completely disposable.

"You're certain there is no sign of Nine, that he had anything to do with this?" Connie asked. She'd find it a lot easier to believe he'd been the one to kill all three of them.

"Not so much as a scorchmark," Barnes said. "We looked, but aside from the syringe Fields used to dose the girl, we didn't find anything besides those three. As impossible as it might seem, it does look like Reynolds shot the others. He was shot in turn by his team leader, and they're all dead. We've moved the bodies, so even if someone believes the girl about killing someone or she goes out to check the woods herself, she won't find anything. No one will. The cop already looked and didn't see anything. No one knows we're watching the house."

Connie shook her head. "The girl knows. She may not understand what she knows, but she was there last night."

"You think she's too much of a risk now? Should we eliminate her?"

"Most likely," Connie admitted. She didn't love the idea, since she didn't know how else they'd catch Nine, as the boy would not come out of hiding easily. True, they couldn't be certain he lived, but if he did, he had to be found and stopped. She knew that killing the girl was still an option. If he learned of it, his anger could draw him out.

As it stood, the girl was about the only thing they had to use against him, and that made her valuable. If she had been behind the death of those guards—unlikely, the girl was a pathetic mess—she was a little

less desirable, but Connie couldn't deny that they had to have her at least a little longer.

"I want video surveillance inside the house."

"That's going to be tricky. She's still there constantly."

"She's due to return to school, and if not for last night, she'd be there now. Have the tech team ready. I want to know what's happening inside that house. If Nine is watching her, we need to know."

"Nine's not... subtle," Barnes reminded her. "He's always been big fires and massive damage."

"Yes," Connie agreed. "So he knows that's what we're looking for. If he's smart, and I'm not saying he is, but if he is... He'll make sure we don't see anything of the sort. He wants to stay hidden, but he will make a mistake for this girl. Trust me, men can be very stupid that way."

"Isn't it a little creepy? The idea of these kids... breeding?"

Connie snorted. Knowing Brenner, it was what he wanted, as soon as his projects were old enough, since he'd been so obsessed with getting Terry Ives' baby. She figured he'd make sure Eleven had plenty of kids when she was older, and maybe his insistence on getting Nine back had something to do with that, but she could at least count on the boy to make that sort of plan an absolute nightmare for the scientist.

Not, of course, that it would ever come to that. She intended to see Nine dead first.

Veronica saw Will come back in from the woods with the dog, telling herself it was stupid to have thought it could have been anyone else. After all, what was she really expecting? A mindless zombie to stumble out of the woods looking for her? That man's ghost?

She shook her head. She was being stupid.

Still, she couldn't help but feel sick every time she thought about last

night. It had been good at first, even if she hadn't missed Jonathan's concerns over the money his mom had spent on all of them, and the movie wasn't that bad even if not really her thing.

Then she'd thought she saw a light again, and she'd gone out into the night, so sure against all reason and logic that it was her pyro again. She'd wanted him to be there, that was true, and she'd sworn for a second she *had* seen him, but then... there was a gun and she'd run and that man tried to kill her.

No, he'd just sedated her.

Had he? What if the drugs only made her confused because she didn't get the dose she was supposed to? He'd only gotten her by accident, hadn't been able to push the needle all the way in, so she might actually have died if he'd done what he was supposed to, and yet she couldn't feel like what she'd done was okay. She'd killed him.

She'd *killed* him.

It was one thing knowing she was responsible for her parents' death, but this? She'd done it. That hadn't been her idiocy causing death at someone else's hands, her stubborn belief and pride, thinking she could change things for someone else. That had been her finger on the trigger.

And she'd killed.

She'd told herself that she was okay with what her pyro had done because he was defending himself, so why was she having such a hard time accepting what she'd done? She'd done it for the same reason, hadn't she?

Yes.

And yet... she was still overwhelmed, feeling guilty enough to drown or hurt herself, and she didn't know how to deal with this. She'd spent the day writing the same two words in her notebook, not sure if she was saying them to her parents, her pyro, or that guy she'd killed. Maybe all of them.

She didn't know how to do this. She didn't know that she wanted to.

She should just have died that night, then she couldn't have killed anyone, and if that guy was... was he watching her because they thought her pyro would come?

Screw them. He must be dead, so fuck them.

She felt like throwing something, breaking it, but there was nothing here that they could afford to lose, and that just made everything so much worse.

She took out her lighter, tempted to burn herself with it. She deserved to hurt, right? She could make herself feel plenty with this.

She thought of the burns on her arms and her stomach turned. She yanked her window open and threw the lighter out the window.

She sat back down on her bed. Now what?

November 11

“We have to get out of here,” Nancy whispered, still shaking in his arms, and Jonathan nodded, forcing himself to move. He'd been so confused and scared there for a second, sure he was going to lose her and not even sure where the hell she'd gone.

He wasn't sure how he'd heard her, because he knew she hadn't gone into that tree but the other world, that place where Will was. A part of him wanted to go in after it, but that was crazy. It had almost killed Nancy.

And it didn't look like they could use whatever it was that she'd gone through now. He swallowed, moving over to the tree and touching it himself. No goo. All solid.

“Jonathan, please.”

“Look,” he said. “It's just a tree now. I don't know what it was a minute ago, but it's not that now. It... Maybe it can't get through now. We can't.”

She bit her lip. "I'm not sure I'm willing to risk it, even if that boy was distracting it."

"What?" Jonathan looked at her, confused again. "What boy? Will?"

Nancy shook her head, her eyes still wide and shaken. "Um... no... it was... he had the trench coat. I think he was... I saw his face this time. The kid from the mall... I... he's... I think that was him. She... he was using fire... and he wasn't alone."

Now Jonathan was really confused. He forced himself up and walked over to her. He held out a hand, thinking as much as he wanted to know more, they couldn't stay here. She was covered in that stuff, and he knew he was cold, so she must be freezing in addition to scared out of her mind.

Not that she was completely falling apart or anything. She seemed a bit lost and numb, and that was familiar, too.

She stood, looking like she might wobble a bit before she fell, so he reached out to steady her.

"You think... I'm as crazy as... they are?"

He snorted. "Um, I think we just proved my mom and my cousin aren't crazy. At least... not about the monster they saw."

Nancy managed a small smile, and he shifted his arm so he could help her walk. She could probably do it on her own, but this made him feel like he was helping, even if it wasn't needed.

"Just the other stuff, then?"

"Well, Veronica is actually, honestly, a bit scary," Jonathan admitted. "And my mom... well, mostly I find her... sad. Not that she's pathetic, but she's been hurt so much and she tries but she can't fix all of our problems or herself... and it's just hard."

Nancy nodded. "I don't think... some things you just can't come back from, you know? They change you. Like this... I don't think... I don't know how either of us will sleep tonight."

He winced. His mom was going to kill him when she found out what they'd done, and her parents wouldn't be happy, either, though they at least didn't know about the monster to fear it. His mom did. And his house was one of the places this thing went.

"Your house might be out of its range," Jonathan said, not sure if that helped. "It won't be able to get you there."

She snorted. "I feel like it could get me anywhere."

"What about the kid you saw? Veronica's boyfriend?"

Nancy shivered. "I don't know. He seemed to be able to keep that thing busy, but it was still alive and it was avoiding the fire... I don't... what if he can't kill it?"

Jonathan swallowed. He didn't know. They hadn't been able to do any damage to it, but then again, they'd been caught off-guard when it stole the deer. "Maybe we can find a better way. Not just look for it like we did tonight."

"Like... a trap?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Maybe. We'd do better if we could talk to him and get that set up with him somehow, but I don't know how we'd do that. Wait. You said he wasn't alone."

"No, I just saw... it went so fast... but I thought I saw someone peek out from behind his coat. It... I'd say it was nothing, just... my imagination, especially since she had no hair but was wearing my dress... an old dress... but one of mine..." Nancy shook her head. "I don't know who she was or if she was even there."

Jonathan didn't know, either, since he hadn't seen the same thing she had, hadn't been there. "Come on. Let's get you home."

The demogorgon was angry.

That much he knew, though how badly he'd hurt it was still a bit debatable. He knew he'd caught it by surprise, but he was still fighting this place to use any fire, and he probably should have been

using his lighter to start anything as he was feeling sick and weak already, but he'd been stupid and used the quickest path when he saw that thing go for Nancy.

Still, he'd forced it back from her and its meal, and he was just the sort of asshole that burned up the deer to spite the thing, which was petty and yet somehow satisfying.

And painful, since now he couldn't move. If that thing came back, he was screwed.

He heard a whimper behind him and swore. "You know, you could have done something. Anything. Been more than a little baby cowering behind my jacket."

Eleven came around to face him. Her face looked paler than before. He didn't know if it was just the way this place worked, since it was darker, or if it affected her, too.

"Papa said it wanted me. That I had to find it."

"Shit," he said. Of course it was Papa's doing. That made so much damned sense. "He made you go looking for it, didn't he?"

She nodded. "Was special. Important. Lots of people watching."

He found himself laughing, falling over and rolling onto his back. "Oh, that fucking idiot. He never learns. Never... fucking... learns."

She leaned over him, frowning. "What?"

"Papa arranged a special demonstration one night for me. All these... important people. Come to see... the little freak..." He laughed, closing his eyes as the pain got to him again. "I burned... all of them... we were all going to burn in that room and die... except Papa, he'd sealed himself away from the flames... and I... I was going to just let it all burn..."

"You're alive."

"Masterful statement of obvious," he said. "Yes. I am... because that night the fire called... and I walked through it... free."

“Free?”

He shook his head. He wasn't free. Wouldn't be free until the lab was stopped, until they weren't hunting him anymore. “It will... come back.”

“We need to find Will.”

He snorted. “Sure. I'm... dying over here... but we'll... find Will. Do you... realize how much it took... to have you come through... with me? Shouldn't... have used... fire at all... here... but no choice... had stop... that thing.”

“What do we do?”

“I don't... care what you do...”

“I'll help.”

He laughed. “Sure. Yeah. Believe that.”

Joyce shifted the folder in her lap, and Hop tried to find some kind of words to apologize, but none came. He'd been wrong. This was a dead end, almost literally, and he was not sure he could make up for that or the time they'd lost chasing a bad lead. He didn't have anything to go on at all, and this was just fucking wrong.

“You think he's one of them?” Joyce asked, opening the folder and flipping through it.

“I haven't even had a chance to look.”

She nodded, turning over the scraps of paper, stopping on one and wincing. He leaned over and put his hand on her back.

“Hey.”

She looked up, and he could see the struggle in her eyes. “What?”

“We're gonna find him.”

“Yeah, like Terry found her daughter?” Joyce asked. She lifted up the page. “Like these parents found their kid? Any of them?”

“We're close.”

She shook her head. “I don't know, Hop. Twelve years? Twelve years she's been looking for her little girl.”

“And then she shows up at Benny's five nights ago, which means we've got a chance,” Hop said. “You know what I would give? For a chance? You know what I would give?”

“Everything,” Joyce whispered, meeting his eyes. “I know this isn't fair. You... you can help me find Will. And Veronica. And Jane. Only... no one can find Sara and bring her back to you. No one can give you back what you lost.”

He took a breath and let it out. That hit harder than he'd thought, not that she'd meant it to hurt. He didn't know how to react, what to say. He wanted to do a few things that seemed stupid and inappropriate, and he forced himself not to give into those impulses.

He cleared his throat. “Any... any likely ones in there?”

“Um... I...” She looked down at the one that had unsettled her before. “This one is... about the right time for Veronica's boyfriend. I don't know if it matters or not...”

“We can always ask for more information,” Hop said. He had a few favors he could still pull in, and he would if he had to. “It won't hurt, even if the source is a little unlikely.”

Joyce nodded, flipping through the pages again. “Looks like there's a mix of kids here. Girls, boys, some older than Jane when they were taken, though none as old as Will. I don't know if there were any other girls—”

“Focus on the boys for now,” Hop said. “We'll have to find out if there were others and look into them, too, but so far all we have is the girl from Benny's diner and Veronica's boyfriend. We're pretty sure Jane is that girl, so we'd just need one for the boyfriend.”

"I think it would be this one," Joyce said, lifting an article out. "It... Maybe it's the weird factor on it, which seems a bit more than most, but... this seems like the one. The date on it puts him around the right age and... there's a lot of odd things about it."

"Like?"

"This baby boy was reported missing from the nursery, and the last nurse to see him was found dead in her home. They couldn't find a gun or the baby, but... she was out sick for a week and then showed up at work unexpectedly, then this baby goes missing..." Joyce shook her head. "I know it's not much, but this feels like the one."

He trusted her instincts. "Then we'll see what else we can find out. Frank should have something for me on Jason Dean, too."

"I just don't understand why we're coming out here," Carol said, leaning forward in the backseat and popping a bubble near Steve's ear. Sometimes she could be really annoying, and he didn't know what Tommy saw in her. Well, then again, he didn't know what she saw in Tommy half the time, so maybe they deserved each other. "She obviously doesn't wanna talk to you."

Steve shook his head. "That's that's not it."

"Oh, really?" Carol asked. "Because no girl would ever blow off King Steve."

Damn it, Steve hated when they called him that. It wasn't right. "She was acting weird. I mean, something was wrong."

"So what?" Tommy shrugged, clearly not bothered or understanding. Steve wasn't sure he got it. If this was Carol, Tommy would care, right? He'd find out what was under her acting weird, wouldn't he?

Carol scoffed. "Like, you're worried about her?"

"What?"

"Aw, you are," Carol said, almost gleeful as she spoke. "Steve has a heart."

Steve's grip tightened on the wheel. "Would you just... stop?"

"Oh, Stevey's in love," Tommy joined in, and Steve wanted to punch him. What was with his friends? What was so damned wrong about caring, anyway? He hadn't just wanted Nancy as a notch on his bedpost. She was different. Special.

"Would you just shut up?"

"Who knew?"

"Shut up," Steve yelled, looking back at Carol, just about ready to smack her back into her own seat. She jumped back on her own, and he kept glaring at her, wanting her to keep her mouth shut this time.

"Look out," Tommy said, and Steve turned back to see someone in the road in front of them.

He swerved, but the car bounced as it hit something, going a bit up in the air, and he felt cold wash over him as panic set in. Oh, hell. He'd killed someone. He'd killed them.

He stopped the car and got out, running over to the kid in the road, rolling him over.

"What are you doing?" Tommy asked. "Come on, let's get out of here before he sees your face or your car. Come on, Steve. You don't want to go down for this."

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Steve asked. "I'm not leaving this guy here to die."

"Damn," Carol said. She looked at Tommy.

"Sorry, man, but I am so out of here," Tommy said, and Carol nodded, both of them running off as the boy groaned, rolling over.

"Fuck."

"Easy," Steve told him. "You're going to be okay. I'll make sure you're okay. Jeez, I am so sorry. I... My friends... they were talking and distracting me... I never meant to hit you. I'm going to get you to the

hospital.”

“No,” the kid said, trying to get up. “No hospital.”

“Food,” another voice said, and Steve looked up with a frown to see a girl standing there, blood under her nose. Her pink dress was dirty like she'd been covered in filth and she had almost no hair.

“Um, you both probably need one,” Steve began, trying to understand the hair and the dress. “He's worse, I think. You're standing. Um...”

The kid in the coat pushed himself up off the ground. “No hospitals.”

“Bad place,” the girl said, going to his side and supporting him as he tried to walk away.

“Hey, wait,” Steve said. The boy looked back at him, and he gestured to his car. “Come on. At least let me give you a ride wherever you need to go.”

“You okay?”

Veronica shook her head. She wrapped the blanket tighter around herself, trying to find a way to calm down. She wanted to believe her great-aunt was just crazy, but at this point, it was hard to say that when she herself looked like a nutcase and a lot of weird, impossible shit was happening all around them.

“No, I'm not,” Veronica admitted. “I don't want to let that dream get to me, but it has. What if she wasn't just crazy? I mean, it sounds like she had to have been, but with what has been going on around here, it's also not impossible that she saw stuff.”

“You think she was some kind of psychic?” Barb asked. “I mean, Jay can do a lot of things he shouldn't be able to do, so it doesn't seem as unlikely as it might have before I was abducted by a monster and saved by him—and I just said monster like there's nothing weird about it—but you think she really knew what was coming?”

“I hope not.” Veronica didn't want to think about how she was surrounded by death. Her aunt said she saw it all around her, and

right now, that was true enough to be extremely unsettling. She'd seen a lot of death in the last few months. Her parents, those soldiers, that guy she'd shot, and then Will.

That supposedly wasn't Will, but what if it was? Or if Jonathan, Nancy, or her aunt got themselves killed?

"I suppose it's not much consolation to say that everything I read about her suggests she was having trouble coping with the reality of what happened to her," Barb said. "She didn't have the greatest home before she disappeared—her father had been partially disabled during World War I, so he had trouble finding work and maintaining their home. A couple people told me he was addicted to painkillers, but I don't know if that's true or not. And the rumors about what happened to her are all over the place and just about as bad as they can be without her actually dying."

Veronica touched one of her own scars, knowing her great-aunt's all seemed to be mental or emotional, though she'd also worn long sleeves and heavy clothes that obscured everything. "I think it would be too easy and dangerous to just assume she was only traumatized. There is something going on here in Hawkins, and it is not just him or Will or even that girl."

Barb nodded. "I agree. I just don't know what we can do about it."

"Maybe nothing," Veronica said. "Or... definitely nothing. I mean, it's not like either of us can ask her. She's dead now. And while you've seen that other place, I haven't. And even if he's right and I do have potential, right now, it's just potential. I don't know how to use it to see anything or whatever it might actually mean for me. So... for now, it's just... a scary possibility, which we so did not need any more of, not with the way things are right now."

"Yeah," Barb agreed. She rose and went to the window. "It's really dark out there now."

"You know you can't leave yet."

"That wasn't what I meant."

“Oh.” Veronica drew in a breath and let it out. “Honestly, I’m trying not to think about the fact that he’s not back.”

Eleven helped Nine into the front seat of the other boy’s car. He didn’t want to go, she could tell he didn’t, but he couldn’t walk, either, and she knew this wasn’t where they were supposed to be. They needed to find Will, but Nine needed to rest. He’d said something about falling out, but she hadn’t understood until they did.

They’d been on the road for a second when the car came, and she’d had to stop it from killing Nine. He was too tired to move. And those others were bad people, wanting to leave him to die, but this one might not be so bad.

He’d stayed. He’d offered more.

She sat in the back, almost excited. She’d never been in a car before. Nine grunted, so she didn’t say anything or smile.

The boy sat down behind the wheel. “Where am I taking you?”

“Food,” Eleven repeated. Nine needed that and rest, and then he could go for Will. “Must have food.”

Nine sighed. “Just... first... late night market... can find...”

“You’re joking, right? You need medical care.”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Hospital... bad place.”

“Why does she keep saying that?”

Nine snorted. “Think... about... it. She has... no hair.”

The other boy winced. “Cancer?”

Nine nodded, and Eleven frowned. She didn’t know what that word meant.

“Brother,” she said, leaning forward to take Nine's hand. He groaned but did not pull away from her. She almost spoke to him in their minds, but he was too weak for that.

“Are you—”

“Yeah. Look... just drive, okay? You don't... need to ask anything else.”

“Yeah, because this isn't all weird, and I'm not at all worried that I might have killed you hitting you with the car like that,” the boy said, grimacing. “I didn't get a chance to look for injuries or anything. You were just—”

“Drive, Mr. Big Hair,” Nine ordered. “Don't... fucking need... anything else from you.”

Mr. Big Hair frowned. “Um, there's no reason to—”

“Hit me with a fucking car.”

“Right. Um...”

“Tired. Sore. Need food. Don't want... answer questions. Don't need your help... if you won't... shut up,” Nine said. “Drive to food. Or not. Can walk.”

“The hell you can.” Mr. Big Hair started the car and pulled away, turning it around and driving forward down the road. He kept looking at Nine as he did, afraid. Eleven was worried, too, but she knew why he was hurting and it wasn't the car. It hadn't actually hit Nine at all. He was just weak from the other world and using his powers. “I'll take you to get food first, but if you get any worse, I'm taking you to the hospital.”

37. Chapter 37

Summary for the Chapter:

Veronica attempts school.

Steve gets his guests food, Hopper and Joyce stop by the station, and Jonathan and Nancy make a decision.

Notes for the Chapter:

Um... I'm not sure how in character anyone is, but I did like the one part at the store.

October 14

“Are you sure about this?” Jonathan asked. His cousin looked at him, but she didn't say anything, lowering her head again. She hadn't touched her food, and he wasn't sure what she was wearing was clean, either. He'd barely seen her since Hopper brought her back yesterday morning, between his need to sleep before school, school itself, and work, but Jonathan thought she might be wearing the same thing that his mom had changed her into after she'd been found half-frozen.

This was not good.

“You can wait another day,” Jonathan said. “No one would blame you for not wanting to rush back to school.”

She looked down at her hands. “Not school that's the problem.”

He supposed she meant that she was, and he grimaced, not wanting to think that. She was still screwed up from her parents' death, which was completely understandable, and whatever happened the other night had been bad, too, or she wouldn't be back almost as bad as she was when she first came to them.

"I mean, I'll drive you in, if that's what you really want, but it's not going to be... simple or easy. This is a small town. Everyone knows everyone, and while I don't know that they know about last night, they're still probably going to talk. A lot. And stare. I don't know if you... Mom wouldn't know. Even Will... he's got friends to support him, and they're all bullied to a degree, so they get it, right? But you... you'd be on your own, and trust me, being seen with me won't do you any favors."

She looked up at him again. "Fuck 'em."

He almost smiled. "Well... I suppose... um..."

She gave him a ghost of a smile as she forced herself up from the table. She picked up her notebooks and started toward the door.

Jonathan didn't know what else to do but follow her. He knew, was almost certain enough to leave without her, that this was a mistake, but if this was what she wanted, he couldn't really stop her. Veronica was her own person, and maybe it would hurt or maybe he was wrong and she'd be fine with the whispers and the looks.

Maybe he was just too sensitive to it after years as Lonnie Byers' son and living on the poor side of town with all the rumors that went around about his mom.

He grimaced, stopping on the porch. Veronica looked too much like his mom. This was not going to be pleasant for her at all.

"Veronica, wait."

She looked back at him. He swallowed.

"Mom wouldn't have told you, doesn't talk about it, but they say a lot of stuff about her. Stupid, mean stuff. And you look like her. History might even seem to be repeating itself. I just... it's not going to be good."

Veronica shrugged. "Nothing is good."

He winced. "I know it's bad right now, but Mom's really trying and it will get better."

She shook her head. "No. It won't."

"What the hell? Since when does this school let freaks repeat the experience?" Carol asked, and Steve looked at her with a frown. What was she going off about now? He turned to Tommy, but his friend seemed just as lost as he was.

"No way," Nicole said. "That's not even possible. And even if they did, why would they let one of the Byers do it?"

Steve turned to see Jonathan Byers leading a girl through the halls. She had notebooks in her hands like any of them might, but she looked a lot like his mom, the sad lady that worked the counter at the general store like twenty-four seven.

Almost. He knew that Joyce Byers was kind of a mess, and this girl was a bit of one, too, but her hair was darker, for one, and Jonathan wasn't walking with her like he would his mom, and why would he need to show her around the high school, anyway? She'd done four years here like most of the parents in this town, even his own.

"I don't think that's his mom," Steve said, leaning back in his chair to study her some more. "Didn't I hear something about them having to take in some cousin or something?"

"Oh, yeah. Some poor orphan whose parents died in a fire or something," Carol said. "She doesn't look much like Annie. I wonder if she knows the song."

Nicole snorted. "Like anyone's going to talk to her to ask."

"I'm still surprised you two know the songs," Steve said, since it wasn't like that was the type of movie he'd expect either of them to have watched. *Annie* was too wholesome for either of them. "And seriously, why would you even bring that up? No one wants to talk about the fact that her parents are dead."

"Are you kidding? That's the only interesting thing about her."

"Well, she does look a lot like her aunt," Tommy said. "Might even be pretty if she had better clothes."

"I didn't know you had a thing for Joyce Byers," Nicole said. "Kind of gross, don't you think?"

"Just said it might be possible," Tommy said. "Not that she is. Besides, she's not exactly the same as Joyce. Hair's different, for one."

"All I can say is that I thought you had better taste."

"Of course I do," Tommy told Carol. "I've got you, right?"

Steve shook his head. He didn't think anyone would expect Tommy to care about anything but the way the girl looked, and it would just be weird to find someone who looked so much like Joyce Byers attractive.

He watched as Nancy Wheeler and her friend Barbara walked up to Jonathan and the girl. Both of them made an effort to talk to her, but she didn't respond, and Byers ended up saying something and herding her away from the others.

"Huh," Carol said. "Looks like the new girl is just as much of a freak as her aunt."

"Must be something about that house," Tommy said. "Drives them all crazy."

November 11

"I... I should probably go."

Nancy looked up at Jonathan, swallowing. She knew that, of course she did. He'd promised his mom he would go home, that he wouldn't do anything himself. If Joyce got home and found out he wasn't there, she'd freak out. With Will and Veronica missing, having Jonathan out, even for a night, would be rather cruel.

And yet, despite knowing that, Nancy wanted to ask him to stay.

Wanted to *beg* him to stay.

"We know your house is in that thing's range," she said, biting her lip. "Are you sure it's safe to go back there?"

He grimaced. "I... I don't know. Probably not, but if I don't and my mom comes home to this empty house after losing Veronica and Will..."

"Yeah, I know. I just..."

"You don't want to be alone," Jonathan finished for her. "I get it. I don't—I don't really feel right about leaving. I want to stay or... It's stupid to ask you to come with me. I'd be putting you at risk again, and that's just wrong."

Nancy pulled her blanket around herself, still feeling chilled and gross despite the warm shower and clean clothes. "It's not wrong. I'd be making the choice, right? And I made it before. It's not you. I wanted to go after that thing, too. I wanted to find Barb. And Will. I still do. I just... I can't stop seeing that thing."

Jonathan winced. "I... I wish there was something I could do to make it easier."

She almost told him to stay, but she couldn't do that. That wasn't right. She swallowed. "What if... This is stupid, but what if we left your mom a note? If we told her what we figured out about the monster and how it sticks to that area? If she knows your house isn't safe, maybe she'll stay away from it, too. She could... I don't know... stay with Hopper? That would be better, right?"

Jonathan nodded. "I think so. It's shown up at the house more than once, so... it can't be good to be there, but trying to get Mom away from there if she thinks Will's there, that would be nearly impossible."

Nancy sighed. "I wish we'd been able to do more, to stop that thing. I... I'm so scared it will come for us again. And if it took Will or Barb, then... did it eat them, like it ate that deer?"

Jonathan choked. "No. Mom said Will was alive."

Nancy sighed. Just Will. They had no way of knowing if Barb was

alive. And even if Will had been alive before, was he now?

"I wish I knew how to find that guy. Veronica's boyfriend."

"Me, too," Jonathan said. "Not only can he get to where Will is, but he can get back. If he wasn't alone, then he took that girl there. He may have taken Veronica there, though God knows why because it's not safe. And... he hurt that thing, right? Got it away from you?"

Nancy nodded. "He kept it back. Told me to go."

"So we know he can fight and he will," Jonathan said. "We said before we could set some kind of trap, but without his help, I'm not sure how much good it would do. Still... if Mom and Hopper were looking into this guy, then... maybe they found something we can use to find him."

That settled it, then. "I'm coming with you."

Hop stopped the truck in front of the station, giving Joyce another look. She was still quiet, and he was worried about her, again, but he didn't know what he could do besides take her home. Seeing Jonathan might help, though not much. He couldn't replace Will or Veronica, and he couldn't lessen Joyce's guilt over losing the others.

"Give me a minute," Hop said. "I'm going to check and see if they sent over any files or faxes."

Joyce swallowed. "Isn't that a risk?"

He frowned. "What?"

"If they're watching, if they know you're on to them, isn't gathering more information in a way they can track or showing it to others, even if you don't mean to but they fax it... isn't that a risk?"

He grimaced. It was. That was why he'd called Frank from a payphone. "We need to know the truth, Joyce, and while they'll want to stop us, we can't let them. Not until we have Will and Veronica back. And if they created that kid and they stole him and Terry Ives' daughter—they have to be stopped. We have to be able to stop

them.”

Joyce nodded. “I know, but Veronica said... Marion and her husband are dead because of this. Others are, too.”

Benny was. Hop was sure now that he hadn't committed suicide. He'd thought maybe it was Veronica's boyfriend, and he still wasn't sure it wasn't, but he knew this connected back to the damned lab, and in the end, they were responsible for his friend's death.

“I know. And maybe they left me alive as a warning not to take it any further, but I can't let this go. They've already done too much damage, hurt too many people. It has to stop.” He didn't know what they were after, but the very fact that they were using kids to get it made the whole thing wrong. He didn't know what he could do if this went up very high in the government, but even the government couldn't stop everything. He'd find some way of ending it.

Hell, maybe that kid was what they needed. He could burn it down if he wanted, right?

“Besides, we need whatever we can get to find this kid,” Hop said. “He's got Veronica, we're almost sure of that, so we need something to tell us where the hell he is.”

Joyce nodded. “Okay. Are you going to ask about this case in Memphis, too?”

“It's a bit late for me to get in touch with the guy I know at the FBI. It'll have to wait until morning, but I will. Not here, though. As much as I didn't want to think about it, you're right and they have to be watching the office somehow. Bugs, maybe, or even someone in it. Who the hell knows at this point?”

Joyce frowned. “Shouldn't they have just made whoever that was have your job? Then they wouldn't have this problem.”

He snorted. “Aw, Joyce. You're being too nice to me. You know the only reason I got this job was pity, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't mostly going through the motions for years. Hell, your son going missing was the first time I'd really worked at anything since I got

here.”

“You're a better man than that.”

“So you like to think, but without you around to keep me in line? Hell, no,” he said. He reached for the door handle and opened the door, stepping down. “If you see anything or anyone... honk the horn. I'll come running.”

“You think they'd try something here?”

“I punched a patrolman, broke into a secret lab... Yeah, I don't put it past them,” he said. “Lock the doors behind me.”

She nodded, and he gave her a quick smile before he shut the door and headed inside.

“Okay, I think we should just go to the hospital,” Steve said as he looked over at his passenger. The boy in the front seat was worse, possibly even dead, though he'd hope the guy's sister would notice and let go, raise some hell or something if that was the case. “You are in real bad shape.”

“No,” the girl insisted. “No hospital.”

“Your brother is hurt. He needs a doctor.”

“No,” the boy said, pushing the car door open. He almost fell out of it, but he stood and walked around the back of it, using the BMW for support the entire time. The girl got out and joined him at the trunk, letting him lean on her as they went toward the market.

Steve shook his head. He so didn't get this. Sure, cancer was scary, but if she was doing better—and it did seem like she was—why would they be so scared of going to a hospital for her brother? He jogged up after them, still frowning.

“Get everything... you want...” the boy told the girl. She nodded, grabbing a package off the nearest shelf and opening it. He snorted. “Need to pay for... it first... twerp.”

She shook her head, forcing it into his hand. The clerk gave them a dirty look, but the kid reached into his pocket and took out two bills, giving them to the girl and nodding to the guy behind the counter. He started eating as she carried the money to him.

The clerk picked it up and studied it in the light. "This real?"

"Fuck you," the kid muttered, and Steve saw the bills were both hundreds. Damn.

"It's real," Steve said, knowing that if it wasn't, he'd pay the difference later. He didn't want to fight about it now, and besides, he owed the guy something for running him over. He looked back at the kid, who'd already finished the bag of corn nuts and was now on a bag of chips. The girl was grabbing everything in sight and either sampling it or shoving it at him, and he somehow kept up with eating it. It was like he was a bottomless pit, not a kid who'd almost been killed by a car not even an hour ago.

This guy wasn't normal.

"You haven't eaten in a while, huh?"

The kid looked over at him, expression full of mockery and annoyance. "Did you get... all hair... and no brains?"

Steve frowned. "What is it with you and my hair? Sure, yours is a little... lifeless, and I think you got a bad dye job because that really doesn't seem a good color for you—too dark, your skin's a bit pale, makes you look sick—then again, you were injured, so you don't look very good but still... you could use a little help with the look. Unless... you recovering from cancer, too?"

The guy looked right at him and flipped him off.

"Mouthbreather," the girl said helpfully, grinning up at her brother as she handed him a candy bar this time. "Yes?"

"I think... you watch... too many commercials," he told her, getting a frown before he started eating it. "Rest counter. Get bag. We go."

She nodded, loading her arms full of chips, corn nuts, and candy bars

until she couldn't carry anymore, putting them all on the counter. She made two more trips as the clerk bagged things up, shaking his head but saying nothing. Steve figured he was going to pocket whatever they didn't end up spending.

She walked back to the coolers and stopped. "No Eggos."

"They'd be frozen... gross anyway. Shit's like cardboard," the kid told her. "No, see, I am about to expand your horizons... blow your mind. Come with me."

She frowned, but he led her over to the slushie machine and filled one. She watched in fascination as he did, then he put a straw in and gave it to her. She eyed it suspiciously.

"Try it. Just... trust me."

She did. Frowning and shocked by the cold, but then the flavor must have hit because she smiled up at him. "Good."

"Yeah. Just don't drink too much at once. It'll hurt."

She nodded, but Steve had a feeling she'd end up with a brain freeze before the night was over. The kid filled up two more slushies before motioning for her to take the bags from the clerk. She did, and he kept both cups as he walked out the door.

Steve swore that was one of the weirdest things he'd ever seen.

"Um, I'm pretty sure you at least overpaid for that," Steve began, and the kid gave him another *you are so stupid* look.

"Yes. I know."

"Okay... but you don't really look like someone who can afford to overpay..."

"You know... jack shit about me," he said. He turned to the girl. "Lesson... Using... greed. Always... use greed. He won't... say we were here... so he doesn't have to admit... to the money."

She nodded, eyes wide.

“Exactly what are you teaching her?”

“Lessons... learned the hard way,” he answered. “Now go away.”

“Um, no, you still need a hospital.”

She shook her head. “Will. Need find Will.”

“What? You know Will Byers?”

The boy shook his head, but the girl nodded. He gave her a warning glare, and she ducked back behind his coat.

“Well, I hate to tell you this, but he's dead. They found his body—”

“Not dead.”

“Shut up,” he hissed at his sister. He frowned as he looked around. “Where the fuck are we?”

“Um, the outside of town. Or close to it. Kind of. If you're looking to hitchhike—which is a really, really bad idea, by the way, there's all kinds of stories about kids disappearing and stuff—you're miles from the major highway you'd need. And I'm not just going to walk away and leave you, even if you do seem a bit better after, you know, the food.” Steve wasn't that kind of a person. He wouldn't let this kid die no matter how stubborn he was. “So where is it you really wanted to go?”

The other boy eyed him for a long moment. “How far are we... from the Byers place?”

“Not that far, but you said you didn't—”

“Either take us there or go the fuck away.”

“It's getting later,” Nancy observed. “And colder.”

“We can go inside if you want,” Jonathan said, though he wasn't sure he wanted to, or that it would be much better with that hole in the front wall. He knew, down in the responsible part of him that

normally dealt with this kind of stuff, that he should fix it or at least make sure the thermostat was turned down so the heat wasn't running constantly, but he couldn't bring himself to go inside the house. Somehow that seemed less safe.

He'd do it if that was what Nancy wanted, but not if she didn't.

"No," she said, running her hands over her arms. "I actually think it's better out here."

"Could sit in the car instead of on the porch."

She nodded. "Maybe if it gets any colder. I just... I don't want to feel... trapped, if that makes sense. I don't know."

"Yeah, it does," Jonathan said. "I don't really want to go inside, either. I know Mom said she could talk to Will, but I can't even bring myself to try it. And I don't... I just feel weird about the whole thing. I said it wasn't happening, but then now... I don't know. Maybe I'm afraid if I try it, it won't work. He won't be there. That..."

"That it'll be proof he's not alive even if we know the monster is real."

"Exactly."

"I feel the same way. Like, about asking about Barb. I'm afraid someone will tell me she's dead, and I don't... I don't know what I'd do if she was." Nancy shook her head. "I hear Veronica's voice in my head sometimes. How she said Barb would never have been there if not for me, and she was right. Barb didn't even want to go. If she hadn't been my friend, she... she would be safe now. Alive and home. Not missing, taken by a monster and probably dead."

"Veronica was lashing out at everyone that day. She was so angry about us not believing her and about... well, everything. It's not your fault. What happened to Barb is not your fault."

He was about to say more to that when a car pulled into the drive. He wanted it to be his mom and Hopper, but even in the distance he could tell the lights were wrong for Hopper's truck. He stood up, frowning. Nancy was at his side, her hand on his arm.

“What is he doing here?”

“I don't know, but I don't think this is going to go over well,” Jonathan said. They hadn't done anything wrong—broken promises aside—but he doubted that would matter when Steve Harrington saw him with 'his' girlfriend.

“It's fine. I—We didn't do anything wrong.”

“And we're going to explain the whole monster hunting... how?”

She grimaced, but she didn't get a chance to answer before Steve was opening his door and getting out of the car.

“Nancy? What are you doing here?”

She didn't answer him, though, going to the passenger door and yanking it open. “You're alive. I thought for sure that thing killed you. I was so sure when we left we were leaving you to die and—oh, God, please tell me you can get back there.”

“You know him?” Steve asked. “Wait, how? What the hell is going on here?”

Jonathan watched with a frown as a girl got out of the back seat, looking around at the yard. That must have been the one Nancy saw before, the one who'd been with that kid in the other world. What were they doing here? And how had they gotten back?

“Hello?” Steve looked at them. “Would someone please explain something here? Like... why you're with the creepy stalker or how you know this kid who came out of nowhere and almost got ran over? Something? Anything?”

“I don't think you'll believe us,” Jonathan admitted. Steve frowned at him. “Just leave it at everyone in my family's insane like you always assumed and just... go.”

“Uh, no. Look, I almost hit this guy with my car. Tommy and Carol bailed on me, but they keep insisting on not going to the hospital and he ate half the convenience store's junk food before we got here which is weird but... whatever, right? He's eating so he's not dead,

but what the hell, man?"

"Mouthbreather," the girl said, and Jonathan looked back at her as the kid in the front seat started laughing.

"Quit calling me that. It's as bad as him and my hair."

Nancy looked over at Steve. "What?"

"Mr. Big Hair," the girl said, pointing to Steve. "Brother named him."

"Brother?" Nancy repeated. "This... is your brother?"

"No," the kid from the car said, standing up and taking a few steps away from it, looking a little unsteady. The girl went to his side and propped him up. He frowned at her. "This... got fucked up good."

"Yeah?" Jonathan demanded. "And where the hell is Veronica? You took her, didn't you? Where is she? If you hurt her—"

"Fuck you. I'd never hurt her," the kid snapped. "She's safe."

"Oh, thank God," Nancy said. She looked like she might actually hug him, and then, to both Jonathan and Steve's shock, she did. "You have no idea how worried we were."

"Nancy, what the hell—"

"Get. Off."

"He hurts," the girl said, and Nancy backed off, looking a bit sheepish.

"I'm sorry. We were just... She disappeared from the hospital after she tried to kill herself and—"

"She didn't fucking try to kill herself," the kid's anger flowed through the words, and Jonathan reached over to pull Nancy back. This guy was dangerous. He was scary intense, just like his mom had said he was. "Shit. Can't... still too weak..."

"Okay, can we back the hell up and start explaining something?"

Anything?" Steve asked. "Please. I'd really like to know. I didn't even know Veronica was missing from the hospital. You... you didn't tell me, Nancy."

"I thought you knew," she said. "It's Hawkins. Everyone knows everything."

That got the kid laughing. "You're joking, right? You don't know shit about what's going on here."

Eleven wished she could make them all less angry. Nine was the angriest, and he was scary when he was angry, but the others were all getting angry, too, and that was bad. She knew that. She knew that Nine could hurt people if he got mad enough, like she did, and she wasn't mad so she wasn't worried about that. She was worried about Nine and the boys. They seemed like they'd fight him.

They couldn't fight him. They wouldn't win, even if he was weak.

She would have to stop them. They needed Nine. She needed Nine. She had to get Nine to get Will so that her friends—so that Mike would let her come back.

She heard something behind her and jumped. Nine put a hand on her shoulder.

"It's another car."

"Probably my mom and Hopper," the boy that was not Big Hair said. "Yeah, looks like it."

"Fuck," Nine said, and Eleven knew that was a bad word, but he didn't stop saying it. He used it a lot. Like maybe it was his favorite word. "We need to go. Now."

"You're not going anywhere," Nancy said. Eleven thought she might be prettier than her pictures, even if she was trying to keep them here. "No way. We need you, and really, you have a lot of questions to answer."

Nine's response was to show her one finger, and she opened her

mouth like she was about to say something to him, but the car stopped in front of them. She backed into Nine, who hit the other car with a groan.

“Don't move,” a man said, and Eleven started to panic when she saw the gun. “Don't you dare move. Where the hell is Veronica?”

“Whoa,” Big Hair said. “What is with the gun? Will someone please tell me what is going on here? I mean all of you keep acting like you know him when I know I don't and Hawkins is not that big. Who the hell is he? How does he know Veronica? What is this? For that matter, what the hell is his name? Could we get one answer here?”

“Nine,” Eleven said, blocking her brother with her body. She looked at the gun again.

“That's not a name. That's a number.”

“Try Jason Dean,” the man said, still pointing the gun at Nine. “Now where the hell is Veronica?”

Eleven focused on the gun, yanking it from the man's hands and throwing it far away from him. Nine looked down at her.

“That was stupid. He could have pulled the trigger. Don't do that with guns again. Ever. You are lucky that didn't go off.”

“What the hell was that?” the man demanded. “How did you—”

“Hopper, maybe if we stay calm, we can all get some answers? Because I don't think scaring them is going to get us what we want. Remember what Becky said? I think we just saw it, but if you don't want to see it again—”

“Right,” Hopper said. He stood, clearly uncomfortable. “You want to tell Veronica's aunt where she is?”

“Please,” the woman said. “I'm so worried about her, and if I know she's okay... I think we can overlook what you did at the hospital.”

Nine looked at her. “I had to get her out. Won't apologize.”

“She was in danger?”

“She has been. Entire time. Because she was nice to me.”

Nancy winced. “You said she was safe now, though, right? She's still safe, isn't she?”

Nine nodded. “They don't know... where she is. Safe from them. Not... listening there.”

“But they are here?” Hopper asked. “They've got devices in that house?”

“Yes. And cameras.”

“What?” the woman demanded, sounding scared. “What... how... when did they put cameras in my house?”

Nine shook his head. “Don't know date. Was... was after she went... to that... place... the school... she was always home... didn't... before... but I saw... them put in cameras... couldn't risk... getting close after that.”

“Dude, you're sounding worse again,” Steve said. “I don't even know how you're on your feet. I mean... I almost feel a bit like I missed something and you didn't actually get hit by my car, but you sound about as bad as when I first stopped.”

“You hit him with your car?” the woman asked, frowning.

“It was an accident. Tommy and Carol were being ass—jerks, and I didn't stop in time,” Big Hair said. “He keeps refusing to go to the hospital. And then he ate like a ton of junk food and sounded a bit better, but now he doesn't.”

“Look, I think we need to—what the hell is that?”

Eleven turned and looked back at the house, the way the lights were flickering all through it. They were pretty, but from the looks on everyone's faces, that was wrong somehow. They weren't on before. She knew that the house had been dark when they got here. What turned them on?

“Will?”

“No,” Nancy said. “It's that thing, isn't it? It's back.”

“Demogorgon.” It was here for Eleven, wasn't it? It had come back for her. It wanted her, just like Papa said. “Need go. Not safe.”

She heard its noise, that thing that it made, so scary, and she bit her lip, tugging on Nine's coat. They had to go. Really had to go.

He pushed her back, going out in front of the car, past the others.

“Don't,” Eleven said. “Please, brother. Not safe.”

“There's a cabin... in the woods... Not sure where... was abandoned... when... found it. They're there,” he said, reaching into his pocket and taking out something metal. He flicked it open, making a small flame come out. “Take Eleven... get her as far... from that fucking lab... as possible.”

“No,” Eleven said, running toward him, but Nancy grabbed her to stop her. She squirmed in her hold, knowing she had to stop Nine before he hurt himself again. He was going to let it kill him to get the others away, and he couldn't. She needed him, and not just for Will.

The demogorgon came through the hole in the wall, and he held out the flame, turning it to face the monster. She almost wanted to throw him like she had Lucas and the gun, but she couldn't.

She held the demogorgon away from him, not letting it attack Nine as he sent the fire toward it. It screamed in anger, and she panicked, letting it go.

And it ran.

The lights went dark.

And Nine fell.

38. Chapter 38

Summary for the Chapter:

School is awkward, so is Hop.

The others recover from the shock of seeing the demogorgon and try to regroup some.

Notes for the Chapter:

Um... well... today was a bad day, we'll just leave it at that... and um... the line at the end was a fitting one, so it stopped there even though I wanted to do more to advance the plot.

October 14

He'd heard the car pulling into the driveway before it got close enough, and he'd lit up a cigarette, waiting in case anyone came close to the shed, but they didn't. The footsteps went up to the house, and the man in the coveralls banged on the door. He watched through a small crack in the shed's door, seeing him turn back to the van.

White. Hawkins Energy on the side of it.

He knew what that meant. The lab.

He watched the others come out of the van, three of them in total. The man in the coveralls lit up his own cigarette and looked around.

"Make it quick. She doesn't think the girl will last all day at school, and those cameras have to be in place before she gets back."

The others nodded, carrying their bags inside. He frowned. He remembered the cameras in the lab. They were too big not to be seen. He used to sit and stare up at the one in his room, knowing they were watching and hating it.

Some of the guards had even talked about when they watched him, and it made him feel sick. Now they were going to do that to Veronica and her family. That was wrong.

He wanted to sabotage the cameras, but how? If he burned them, they'd know he was there, and he couldn't go out and kill these men or they'd know he was here. He wasn't sure they didn't already know, but he thought that if they did, they wouldn't have let Veronica leave this morning.

He had to do something, but he would have to figure out a good way to do it. Maybe if he could use the fire somehow to cause a short in the electricity and blow the cameras? He didn't know that he could, not control it like that, but then he'd been able to use it on the weather, so maybe.

He would need practice so he didn't burn the house down.

And he shouldn't go anywhere in Hawkins, which was another problem.

He wanted to stay close and protect Veronica, but if they had cameras, it was dangerous, and it was even... wrong. They'd be watching stuff the family did that no one should see.

He had to do something. He looked down at his cigarette, took a drag, and thought about it. It wasn't like he didn't need to do some shopping. He could find a good place to test his abilities where no one would bother him, though it would mean at least a day if not more away from Veronica.

After that night in the woods, he wasn't sure if he should do it. They could hurt her for that, and he didn't know that they wouldn't. He had to do something to make sure it was safe for them.

He could maybe sabotage the power after the men left, which would mean a bit of time where they couldn't use the cameras. That might be worth trying. It would give him the time to practice for better control over the cameras themselves.

He would also be able to see Veronica if he did, make sure she was

okay after going to that school. He hadn't liked it when he went, and he wanted to know that she hadn't been hurt there, either.

So he'd wait. And then he'd fix this. Somehow.

Jonathan guided his cousin through the halls, still not sure what he was doing. His schedule wasn't the same as hers, though that was probably for the best as it would just be awkward, but he didn't know what she would do left on her own, since she seemed to be waiting for him after each class anyway. He half wondered if she was doing it because she was tempted to bolt like she had the other night, running off into the woods and whatever else that was.

Lunchtime rolled around, and he led her down to the cafeteria, thinking she might brave it more than he did—he didn't usually bother with it, not when he was mostly uncomfortable with people. He preferred dealing with them at a distance.

“You'd start at that end,” he said, nodding to the entrance for the line. “Come out the other. Just like any other high school, I'd assume.”

Veronica nodded, gripping her notebooks tighter.

“I usually eat outside,” he said. “And the food here... it's kind of terrible and usually not worth the price.”

She looked at him, and he grimaced. He didn't mean to let that slip. Their money problems were always on his mind, but he hadn't wanted her to feel like she was a part of that, even if she kind of was. Things would get better once she had her money from her parents.

“It's up to you if you want to eat the food,” he said. “You can or not as you like. I'm just warning you it's not usually good.”

“Westerburg's was gross. And it was for rich kids.”

He gave her a small smile. She tried to smile back but didn't manage it. He was about to usher her out when two girls walked up to them. He should have known someone would do the kind thing and reach out to Veronica on her first day, and he was not surprised to see it

was Barbara Holland and Nancy Wheeler.

He really didn't need this, since he'd been doing his best to avoid Nancy this year, but they were the kind of people who would try and make a new person welcome.

"Hi," Barb said. "You're Veronica, right? You're in my history class."

Veronica looked at her like she had no memory at all of the class or Barb being in it.

"I don't think we have any classes together, at least not so far, but I'm Nancy Wheeler," Nancy said, smiling. "I just wanted to welcome you to Hawkins."

Veronica stared at her like she was insane.

The silence stretched on awkwardly, and Jonathan found himself forced to break it. "Actually, it's been kind of a long day already. I figured I'd take Veronica home. You know, she's easing into her new schedule."

"Yeah, sure," Nancy said, trying to make it a little less uncomfortable. No one could.

Jonathan led his cousin out, taking her to the car without a single word or protest.

Hop pushed open the store door. He knew that he should have had this conversation yesterday, but he'd finished his search, called into the office, and gone home to get some rest. He hadn't dealt with anything else, not after that.

He knew he should have, but it had been a quiet day aside from the niece going missing in the night, so he hadn't had much to miss by not going in. He just knew he should have done more than leave Joyce a note to say he'd found nothing. She deserved more, at least a call, and a better man would have made sure she got one.

He was doing his duty now, at lunch, a day late, because he was a bit of a coward. Maybe just a bum. He'd been tired, but it wasn't much of

an excuse. Joyce had still worked after the night she'd had. He could have done more. He just hadn't, and a part of him would kick himself for that for the rest of his life.

Joyce looked up from her magazine as he came in. Another slow day in Hawkins, he saw, but that was a good thing, he supposed.

"Hey."

"Hi, Hop."

She looked worn out, and he wondered if she'd slept last night. He knew neither of them had gotten much the night before, but last night after work should have been better.

Then again, this was Joyce. "How are you doing?"

She shrugged. "About the same. What about you? Any interesting calls around the station lately?"

"Not since your call in the middle of the night."

Joyce flinched. "I am so sorry I woke you. I just didn't—"

"You were right to call," Hop told her. "It's my job. And I found her. I'm glad I did. She was pretty shaken up out there. How's she doing, anyway?"

"Fine, I guess. I kept getting up to check on her last night, but she didn't leave the house," Joyce said. She looked away, out at the street. "She insisted on going to school today anyway."

"You're kidding."

Joyce shook her head. "No. She got up, got ready... When I left, Jonathan was still trying to talk her out of it, but I'm pretty sure she went. She's stubborn. Stronger than she looks, too."

"Not surprised. She takes after you in more ways than one."

Joyce blushed, ducking her head. She moved over to the other side of the counter, fiddling with the newspaper. "You know anything about

lawyers?”

“What?”

“The one my sister hired is ducking me. I'm waiting for his lunch to be over so I can actually talk to him, but he promised me it wouldn't take long to set up her trust and get it to us, but it's been weeks already and he hasn't done it.”

“In my experience, people drag their feet with anything that has to do with money,” Hop told her. “But if you need someone to go down there and intimidate him, you just give me a call.”

She rolled her eyes. “It'll be fine. Did you need anything from the store?”

“Uh...” He didn't want to admit he'd come just to see her. “Pack of cigarettes, actually.”

November 11

“Is it gone?”

“Is he dead?”

“Stay put,” Hop said, moving forward. He wished he still had his gun, and he swore he would have words for that girl, but for now, he'd keep them to himself. No need panicking everyone more than they already were. Things were tense as hell around here, and there was no way to be sure that Dean had chased that thing off for good. He might not have done more than give it a scare.

He went up to the porch, kneeling down next to the boy, checking his pulse. He looked like he was barely breathing, but Hop had a pulse, so the kid was alive, for now.

“We should get them all out of here,” Joyce said, and he looked back at her. “It's not safe. That thing has come back more than once, and while I thought I wanted to be here to be close to Will...”

"Hiding," the girl with the shaved head said. "Gone... hiding, not here."

"Sweetheart, you're bleeding," Joyce said, going over to check on her. Nancy let her go, but instead of allowing Joyce to look at her, she ran over to Hop's side and took the boy's hand, wrapping it in hers.

"Nine."

"He's alive," Hop told her. "Pretty weak right now, but he's alive."

She looked up at him. "The bad men... they'll come... the demogorgon..."

"We are getting out of here," Hop said. "Boys, get over here for a second. I need help moving him into the truck."

"Go with," the girl said.

"We're all going," Joyce told her. "All of us. We have... we have a lot to talk about, things to plan, and we have to take care of you and your brother. Let me look at your face."

The Wheeler girl folded her arms over her chest, frowning as she stood next to Joyce and the other girl. "You know, I would swear that was my dress, but if it was... Have you been hanging out with Mike and the boys? They've all been acting weird. I thought it was just Will and him missing and then dead—"

"Not dead," the girl insisted. "Hiding."

"We'll get to that," Hop said, since he wanted to know what this girl knew about Will and what the hell they were going to do about it. "But not here. Not if they're listening. They could even be on their way, and I'm not about to be here when they show up."

"Where are we going to go? Back to your house?" Jonathan asked as he went to Dean's feet, waiting for Harrington to get his shoulders.

Hop shook his head. He had a feeling he knew exactly where this kid had stashed Veronica, and it was actually a damned good hiding place. His grandfather had been dead for years, and very likely no

one remembered that cabin was still out there. He'd stuffed some of his own crap out there years ago, not wanting to see it again, and he didn't think anyone had been there in years. He certainly hadn't.

"You'll follow me in your car after we get him in the truck," Hop said, taking out his keys as he walked to the back of the truck. Harrington and Jonathan had Dean, despite the awkwardness of carrying him, and didn't drop him on the way to the truck. Hop opened the back and let them put the boy inside.

"His car? Why his and not mine?" Harrington asked, frowning. "I mean, mine is—"

"We're not arguing over this," Hop said, forced to stand back as the girl ran around him and jumped up next to her brother.

"Food," she said. "Need the food."

"What?"

"The two of them bought out the convenience store of junk food earlier," Harrington said. "He seemed a bit better after he ate, but then... he did that and... that actually happened, right? There was a monster without a face and he fought it off with a bit of fire and... What the hell is going on here?"

"Told you. We'll discuss it, but not here."

Hop stopped the truck in front of the cabin, and Joyce almost smiled. She knew this place. Sure, it had been years since she'd been out here with him, but a secluded spot like this and a couple of teenagers made for a dangerous combination once or twice. She'd almost forgotten about it, though, and she never would have thought to come here to look for her niece.

She opened the door and stepped out, pulling her coat close to her as she took a step toward the cabin.

"Veronica? Are you here? It's Joyce. We... we've been looking for you. We were worried after you left the hospital."

Getting no answer, she turned back to Hop. "Maybe this isn't the right place?"

He shrugged. "Might not be. We might have to try and wake him to find out, but we can do that later if we have to. At least it should be safe to talk here."

Joyce nodded. She watched as the others got out of Jonathan's car, the boys going over to the back of the truck without being asked to do it. He went around back, opening the door again. She watched the girl jump down, her eyes never leaving her brother even as she chewed on a candy bar.

A screen door squeaked open, and she whirled back to see someone coming out of the cabin. Nancy's eyes widened, and she ran over, hugging her friend.

"Barb," Nancy said. "Oh, God. I was so worried. I thought that thing had killed you. I thought you were gone forever. Lost in that... that place. I just... I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have... I should never have made you go with me to the party... I should have listened when you wanted to go... I—"

"Nancy, it's okay," Barb said. "It's not your fault. You couldn't have known. I mean, I know I'm lucky to be alive. I am, but it's not... I'm okay. We're both okay. I was worried about you. When Jay told me you and Jonathan were going after the monster—"

"What?" Joyce demanded, turning to her son. He grimaced. "Jonathan, you promised."

"I know," he said. "I just... we wanted to be doing something. I thought if you were going after Veronica's boyfriend then I could keep looking for the monster. I thought... I could find Will. I still do."

"This is not yours to fix alone. You act like you are all alone in this world, but you're not," she said, frustrated. "You're not. I know that I might not always be the best parent or give you what you need, but I'm still your mother."

"I know."

She pulled him close, holding on and trying not to think about losing him, too. She could not do that, and she thought he knew that, that he understood.

“Is Veronica here?” Nancy asked. “We... he sort of said she was at this cabin, but just now when we pulled up, no one answered.”

“I'm here,” Veronica said. She came down off the porch, and Joyce let go of Jonathan to go to her, pulling her into her arms.

“I was so worried. I woke up and you weren't at the hospital,” Joyce said. “When I found you at the house like that... I thought I'd lost you —”

Veronica pulled away. “I didn't do that, okay? I did not try to kill myself. I wouldn't. I know I've been a mess, but it wasn't just me. It was them. They wanted me thinking I was crazy, that what I'd seen when they killed my parents wasn't real and... and they... it was just a trap for him. They almost killed me so that they could get him.”

Hop swore, not the only one to do so.

Nancy looked back at her. “What if they'd killed you?”

“That woman said she figured he'd come after them anyway, but they wanted me alive for the trap so he wouldn't get so angry he burned the whole lab down,” Veronica answered. She looked at Joyce. “He didn't know any other way of keeping me safe besides switching us, and as soon as he could, he went back to check on you.”

“Sweetheart, I am not mad,” Joyce said. She might have been, if she'd been a little less scared and worried for everyone's sake, and she would be madder at Jonathan, too, but there was too much going on to allow herself to get caught up in the anger. “I just... I was worried. We all were. We've all done a lot of stupid things since this started, we've kept things from each other and doubted each other, and that needs to stop now. We have to work together to end this.”

“That means you're going to explain stuff, right?” Harrington asked. “Because I'm still almost completely lost.”

“We've got a lot of talking to do,” Hop said. “Let's start by getting

that kid inside.”

“He looks worse,” Barb said, frowning and chewing her lip as Veronica sat down with Jay, combing her fingers through his hair. She didn't think the other girl was about to leave him, even if they were supposed to have a talk about all this. Maybe they should have moved the bed into the front room.

“Worse?” Joyce asked. “What do you mean, worse?”

“Tired,” the girl said, and everyone looked at her like she was the crazy one.

“Drained,” Veronica corrected. “He... he said... using what he can do makes him weak. Very weak depending on the fire. If he sleeps and eats, it helps, but he hasn't stopped much lately. Not since this thing started.”

“It's more than that,” Barb said. “That... place. The dark world—”

“Upside Down.”

“—when he's in there, it hurts him more to use what he can do,” Barb said. She caught all the eyes on her now, and she shrugged. “I was with him for maybe a day in there after that thing took me. He... he fought it off, but it was still out there, so we had to keep moving as much as we could—and he kind of couldn't... he kept having to rest. He said it was harder to use his abilities there.”

“He did?”

“Well, technically what he said was that it fucked with him to do it, but yes,” Barb said. “Look, I'm not making this up. He was so bad in there he didn't know if he could get us back out. He had us looking for an alternate way because he thought doing it his way would kill us both. And... when he did do it, I kind of thought it had killed him.”

Hopper frowned. “What do you mean?”

Barb gestured to the bed. “He was like this for hours. I cleaned the

cabin, took a shower, washed my clothes, did more cleaning, more washing... He was so still and quiet I thought he'd died... I had to keep checking on him to be sure."

Joyce grimaced. "And you say he's worse now?"

Barb nodded. "Yeah. We both told him not to go after you right away, but he did. Veronica was worried you were in trouble because of the switch, and then he knew that Jonathan and Nancy were going after the monster, so he left again when he really shouldn't have."

"Was she with him then?" Nancy asked, looking at the girl. "Because she was when he stopped the monster from getting me when I was there, but... she wasn't before?"

The girl shook her head. "Wanted him... find Will... for Mike. They were... fighting. I was upset. I... he said it was my fault he was there instead of where you were."

Veronica flinched. "So he went in and out of the firewalk... what, five times? That's way too much. He... he can't do that again."

"He also lit that thing on fire. Twice. Once in there with Nancy, and then again at the house," Jonathan said, grimacing as Veronica lowered her head, looking like she might cry as she held onto Jay.

"Okay, can we back things up and explain some more?" Steve asked. "Because... you're talking about stuff that... it's not possible. I mean, somehow he used a lighter like a blow torch against a creepy ass thing that looked like a monster, but that's just... that's... Come on. This is... too much, right? I mean, I saw that thing, so it's not just... but it's..."

"It's complicated," Hopper said. "And it goes back a ways from from where we are now. Seems it started with MK Ultra experiments back in the day. Mind control experiments."

"And he's one of them?" Steve asked. He turned to the girl. "You are one, too?"

She lowered her head in shame. "Yes."

"Eleven," Veronica said. "It's not your fault. Just like it wasn't his fault. Neither of you asked for this. You didn't have a choice."

Eleven bit her lip. "Papa said—"

"He told us that this guy you know as Papa—he's not your real father—he'd twist stuff to make you think you had a choice or wanted to please him but it wasn't a choice and doing what he asked was still wrong, but you didn't know any better. Neither did he until he got free," Barb said. "And you can all stop staring at me like that."

"Guess I expected the defense from her," Hopper said, nodding to Veronica. "You're a bit of a surprise."

Barb shrugged. "He *did* save my life, and I've spent a while with him by now. He's fascinating in a way but also scary and dangerous and... but he's also a scared, lost kid who never had a normal. He's still... decent. He got me out of there."

"You're still here, though," Nancy said. "You didn't go home or tell any of us you were okay."

Barb grimaced. "Well, at first I was afraid he was going to die, and I couldn't leave. Then he woke up and... he reminded me that they might go after me and my family like they did Veronica's if they thought I knew about him—or just because I knew about the monster—so I stuck around to figure out a way to keep us all safe... and Veronica and I came up with a cover story, but it was too dark to go back by then and I actually don't know where we are."

"Cover story?"

"Barb wasn't taken by a monster," Veronica said. "Well... a human one. One of those sick killer types... The same one that took Will... who had already taken an older boy who helped Barb escape but she thought he was dead... he'd been with the sicko for years and was forced to help him with some of the stuff... like luring new kids in."

"Damn," Hopper said, but Veronica just shrugged.

"It fit without a monster, it was a reason she'd never want to discuss it, and she wouldn't be seen as insane like I was. It would also keep

everyone from hunting him because he didn't do anything wrong. This time, at least.”

“Other times?”

Veronica sighed. “He did kill the men who came into my house the night my parents died. Not my parents. They shot them. He... he lit the soldiers on fire and burned the house down to get us out. And he said they'd done the same thing to the guy posing as his father the night before.”

“Bud Dean.”

Veronica nodded. “Bud wasn't his father, either. He was just a guy who... he exploited his ability to use fire but gave him food and shelter and he accepted that messed up situation because he didn't know any better, but Bud wasn't a good man, not from what he told me. Not as bad as some, maybe, but not that good.”

“You sure he didn't kill this guy?”

Veronica glared at him. “What, you want me to prove it? I wasn't there for that. He said Bud was already dead when he set the fire to escape. He just took his hamster and left. He did kill the people who'd killed Bud. And others before them, but he didn't tell me how many, and it sounded like he was defending himself. He was forced to do those experiments. They'd hurt him if he didn't, and after he got free, he was living on the streets and more people hurt him..”

Hopper shook his head, swearing under his breath again.

“He's not a bad guy,” Veronica insisted. “He hasn't known any better, not before me, and he... he has done so much here that shows he's been learning and choosing to do the right thing, and that's important.”

“I never said it wasn't,” Hopper told her. “I'm just... Look, I was a father once, too. This stuff, experimenting on kids? Hurting them? It makes me really damned angry.”

“Which is why we're going to stop it, right?” Veronica said. “It's not just about him. Or Eleven. Not only did they screw with both their

lives and their minds... they let that monster loose.”

“Yeah. But they're government, so stopping them won't be as easy as it sounds.”

“And we still have to find Will,” Joyce said. “He's alive. He's out there, and we have to get him back.”

Veronica grimaced. “Well, our best chance of that is out cold, so... we're fucked.”

39. Chapter 39

Summary for the Chapter:

Veronica discovers a problem at the house.

The planning session might just need some help from more people.

Notes for the Chapter:

I realized after I got stuck again that I should just have had them pick up the boys so that part could be explained at the same time.

Between that and life and everything, it was hard to get this done and it's not what I wanted, but it is progression, and I really do feel guilty about not finishing things.

October 14

Veronica had thought that surviving her first day of school would make things different somehow.

She was wrong.

She didn't feel different. Didn't feel better. She was the same fucked up mess she'd been the day before, maybe worse, and the fact that Jonathan had to bring her home at lunch just proved that. She hadn't known what to say to anyone, not even the teachers.

She knew the answers to plenty of the shit they were going over in their classes, but she hadn't been able to voice them, just turned pages when she actually remembered she was in the class, her mind constantly back in the woods.

She had been so sure she saw her pyro there, just for a moment, but

he'd gone. She must have been doing more wishful thinking again. He wasn't there. He was dead. She was almost sure of it.

He would have been here by now if he wasn't, right?

She no longer knew what to think, not that she'd been sure before, but that night in the woods confused her even more than the fire did. She was still lost, and it was hard to feel like this, like she'd never come back from that night her parents died. She didn't know if it was just the guilt or what, but now, with another person's death on her hands, she felt worse.

She just wished she knew for sure if he'd been there. If she knew that she'd seen what she thought she'd saw, maybe she could stop feeling so... confused. She could almost justify killing that man she'd shot if he'd been out there after her pyro. If she knew he was there, then it would make so much more sense.

Especially since her aunt's friend Hopper said there was no one out there in the woods. No body. No man she'd killed.

Did that mean that she hadn't killed anyone? She didn't think so. She remembered pulling that trigger. She'd done it. He'd fallen. He was dead, had to be. Still, he hadn't been there when the policeman went looking. He hadn't found him. No body, no gun.

So what? Had her pyro really been there? Had he gotten rid of the body? How? Burning it to ash?

Not in that rain, right? And if he'd done that, wouldn't that lab know he'd done it and been on her? Wouldn't they be using her for bait in a different way? She'd be locked up in that lab, hidden away where he had to go to them to find her, and it would mean him dying. That's what they really wanted, wasn't it? Why had they let her live with her aunt for this long?

None of that made any sense at all.

She shook her head as she went to the refrigerator, wanting something to drink. She opened it up and frowned, looking in at the darkness. Was it just because the bulb was out? She stuck her hand in

and grimaced. The fridge was definitely not working.

She turned around, looking for other things that had power, checking each thing she found and discovering that more than one of them wasn't working.

Something had knocked the power out. Great.

Now what did she do? It wasn't like she knew anything about starting that up or who to call to do it. Jonathan was back at school, she assumed, though he'd offered to stay with her.

She sighed, going down to the phone and picking it up, hoping it would still work even if nothing else in the house was.

“Are the cameras online?” Connie asked, coming into the surveillance unit. She had been waiting for word and heard nothing, which displeased her. She should have at least been given the message that the cameras were installed by now. She'd told them they didn't have much time, and they should have been done by now.

“We have a problem,” the tech said, and she frowned. That was not what she wanted to hear. They did not need more problems. They had enough with Nine loose, and he could cost them everything. He had to be stopped.

“What kind of a problem?”

“Something went wrong when they put the cameras in. It caused a short in the whole house. We've got nothing because they have no power.”

She put a hand to her head. “Tell me you're joking.”

“The girl arrived home not long ago. It shouldn't be more than a couple hours before the power is restored. We'll have to wait until later to see how well the feeds work, but as long as it's just the power that's a problem, we'll have them back up and running again soon.”

Connie nodded, though she was far from pleased. This was an annoyance they could not afford, not when they had lost three men

the night before with no decent explanation for it. She was not looking forward to telling anyone that they had somehow killed each other. She still wasn't sure she believed that.

“Agent Dyer?”

“What?”

“Doctor Brenner was looking for you.”

She sighed, turning away from the monitors and making her way toward the elevator. She had no interest in watching him with his pet experiment, though she knew that was where he'd be, with Eleven. He thought of little else besides making her a success, and Connie was starting to believe that none of these children would be what they wanted.

That would lead to him creating a second generation of them, she was sure, which would be far more dangerous than the first. Especially if part of that plan involved Nine. He might be strong, gifted in ways no one had expected, but that did not make him a good basis for a new project. What they really needed was someone more malleable, and even Eleven was proving less obedient than they would like. Brenner might have learned from his mistakes there and was handling her with better care than he had Nine, but that meant very little over all.

The elevator stopped on the lab floor, and she walked out, going toward Eleven's room. The darkened doorway of Nine's former chamber seemed a quiet mockery to her, practically a taunt.

She should, in all honesty, end Eleven before she was a threat, but she would be scrapping the project if she did, and that was something she wasn't ready to do. Brenner's ideas had some merit. They were just unpredictable and therefore dangerous.

Brenner came out of Eleven's room. “I hear we have setbacks.”

“We lost three men in the woods, supposedly to killing each other, and now the power's gone out at the Byers house leaving us in the dark as to any activity there,” Connie said. “The girl may be too

much of a risk to keep alive.”

“I remember us discussing this before.”

“And things have not changed, as we have no actual proof that the girl killed them or that Nine was in any way involved. If we had, things would be different.”

“You're sure there was no sign of Nine? This girl hardly seems the type to kill three agents.”

“I'm sure she's not. She hardly seems any sort of threat at all. She's weak and her mind is confused. The only reason she's of any use is if Nine comes for her.”

“How long do you intend to wait for him to show himself?” Brenner asked. “A month, perhaps?”

“They ask you for a time limit?”

“No. I'm just curious about your patience.”

She gave him a thin smile. “I still work with you, don't I?”

November 11

“He's not our only hope,” Hop said, well aware that even if this kid had some freaky ass ability, he wasn't about to put everyone's lives in his hands. As much as Veronica trusted him and he seemed to have done things that saved lives, they didn't know that this kid would do what they asked of him, and even if he did, what happened when he set a fire that got out control?

For that matter, what happened if he went up against that thing again? He was likely to end up dead, considering how bad it had hurt him to do what he'd just done.

“We did find a different way in,” Jonathan said. “Nancy did, at least, when we were hunting that thing. I couldn't find it, but we were able

to call to each other until she found her way back out. And then it seemed to... close up somehow. It was in this tree, and then it... wasn't."

"So if these things exist, we could find one and use it to get in and out?"

Nancy grimaced. "I think it might have made it. I'm not sure, but we tracked it there after it took the deer. It was... It found it by the blood, maybe."

"That's what we thought," Barbara agreed. "Me and Jay figured that thing was tracking us because I was bleeding. So was he when he used his fire, but my hand was constantly until he... um... cauterized it. And then we were worried about my feet because I'd been dipping my feet in the pool when that thing grabbed me."

Hop nodded. That might be useful, knowing it came after blood, but that didn't tell them how to get Will back or how to find him. Getting that thing back wasn't what they wanted at all. "So it tracks blood and can make its way in and out of that world. We can use the paths it made, but we can't make our own, that about right?"

Joyce nodded. "I think so."

"Except everyone says he can do that," Harrington said, nodding to the boy on the bed. "Go in and out of that place. He can, right?"

The girl Veronica called Eleven nodded. "Yes. He can."

"Is he the only one who can besides this monster?"

"That we know of," Hop said, eying the girl and wondering just what it was she could do if the firemaker was her brother. Could she do the same kind of crap? Or was she something different? They'd seen her throw his gun, so she could at least move stuff with her mind.

"You can do more than just toss guns around," Hop said. "What else?"

She bit her lip. "I can find Will."

Joyce stared at him. “What?”

She nodded. “I found him before. With the radio. He was singing. And I know... I left Mike because I could find Will... and Nine can get us to him. Nine was going to make sure Nancy and Jonathan were safe first.”

“He did,” Nancy said. “I might not have gotten away from that thing if he hadn't shown up when he did.”

“We need a plan that doesn't center on him,” Hop said. “As much as he might be our best option, he can't be the only one. That thing came from somewhere in the beginning, and I'd bet it was the damned lab.”

The girl gulped, but he knew he was right about that. The lab had a way into that place, a way they could use to get into it and get Will if they knew where to look.

“You said you left Mike and the others behind,” Jonathan said, focusing on her. “What do the boys have to do with this? What do they know?”

She lowered her head. “They found out... there's a rift. Mr. Clarke told them it was the way into the Upside Down because we're the acrobat, not the flea.”

“What?”

Joyce frowned. “I'm sure it's one of his explanations—the boys are always telling us how he makes science understandable for everyone, even the ones who don't care for it or aren't as smart as they are, but it must have lost something in translation there.”

“Are you telling me you want to go get the boys, too?”

She grimaced. “We don't know what all they know. It might be helpful, since we're trying to piece together another plan that doesn't rely on Veronica's boyfriend.”

“We'll all still be here,” Veronica said. “As long as he's out, I'm not going anywhere. Eleven's not going to leave. Barb's not going

anywhere, which means Nancy won't want to go—though she'd be the ideal way of getting Mike or the others out without everyone freaking out and getting upset—and Jonathan will want to watch over Nancy same with Steve, so that basically means... everyone's staying put and safe right here.”

Hop had to admit, they had a point. “It works, other than us needing to sneak those kids out, if anything.”

Joyce winced. “I don't want to lie to Karen about her kids. It's bad enough Nancy's here and almost died today, but pulling Mike out? And Lucas and Dustin?”

“It would be worth it to get Will back, wouldn't it?” Nancy asked. “I was willing to do whatever it took to find Barb, and I bet Mike feels the same about Will. If the boys found Eleven and were chasing some kind of... rift, then they've been searching for Will, too.”

Hop grunted. “I told them not to.”

“Yeah, like anyone would listen to that,” Veronica said. “I know that they were out at least once. I saw them the night they found that body in the quarry. I saw Eleven that night. I tried to warn her because she was putting the boys at the same risk that I'd put my parents in... that and I thought she could help me find him because at the time I didn't know where he was... but then the body turned up and the next day... they came to the house and tried to kill me.”

Barbara swallowed. “I think that if we're right about what these people are willing to do, then we can't really risk bringing in anyone else but everyone who already knows is at risk, so we'd actually be saving the boys.”

Veronica nodded. “If they find out the boys know about Eleven or are chasing this rift, they could do something to hurt them. I'm only alive because they wanted me as bait for him. I don't know if they'd try that with Mike and Eleven, but should we even take that risk?”

“Hell, no,” Hop said, sick of kids being in danger and dying around him. “I want your word—all of your word—that even if he wakes you won't go and do anything stupid while we're gone.”

"I told you I'm not going anywhere," Veronica said. "And I am almost certain that goes for everyone else."

"I'll stay here," Jonathan said. "Though I think it would be easier for you to get to Mike and the others if Nancy snuck back in and got her brother, at least."

Nancy nodded. "I agree. I can get in and out—I don't even think my parents are aware I'm not home right now, so I can just go, get back in, tell Mike I know where Eleven is and he can come with me to help us get Will, and we'll go from there."

"The other advantage to staying here is that—if Nancy and I are right about the pattern that monster uses—we're well outside of the range where it can travel, but our house, Steve's house, and the woods where they found Will's bike is not. We were out in the woods when it took that deer, but not out here. This cabin and Nancy's house... they're probably far enough away to be safe."

Hop grimaced. "Not liking that probably."

"Almost everything at this point is theoretical," Nancy said, "but if we are right—and since so far that thing hasn't found any of them here, it would seem like we might be, at least about here—then this cabin is safe. And we can find out what the boys know and make a real plan."

"And it gives him some time to rest if he does end up being the only way in."

"I should have gone after her."

Dustin swore he was going to hurt Mike himself at this rate. He was more than a little obsessed with Eleven—though he did in part want Eleven back because he was sure she could find Will, so it wasn't just about her, but it was close enough. And if Lucas heard him, no shake of hands would make him forgive him at this rate, and it sucked. It just plain old sucked.

"Mike, we have no idea where she is. We can't find her right now. It's

too late and too dark,” Dustin said, wishing he'd calm down already and go to sleep. “We'll do it first thing in the morning.”

Mike flopped down on the couch. “He should've shaken my hand.”

Dustin wasn't so sure about that, not when Lucas could have been really hurt by what Eleven did. “He's just jealous.”

“What are you talking about?”

Dustin sighed. “Sometimes, your total obliviousness just blows my mind. He's your best friend, right?”

“Yeah,” Mike answered right away. Then he thought about it. “I mean, I don't know.”

Dustin wasn't sure he realized that it was a bit of an insult or not or if he was even trying to make up for what he'd said. Maybe. Mike wasn't usually a bad guy, though lately he'd been a bit of a dick all things considered. “It's fine. I get it. I didn't get here until the fourth grade. He had the advantage of living next door. But none of that matters. What matters is that he is your best friend. And then this girl shows up and starts living in your basement, and all you ever want to do is pay attention to her.”

Mike shook his head. “That's not true.”

“Yes, it is,” Dustin insisted. “And you know it. And he knows it. But no one ever says anything until you both start punching and yelling at each other like goblins with intelligence scores of zero. Now everything's weird.”

Mike took that in, looking almost like he might agree for a change. “He's not my best friend.”

Dustin snorted. “Yeah, right.”

Mike sighed. “I mean, he is, but so are you. And so is Will.”

Dustin shook his head. “Can't have more than one best friend.”

“Says who?”

“Says logic.”

“Well, I call bull on your logic, because you're my best friend, too,” Mike said, and Dustin looked over at him. One thing about Mike, he really believed this stuff. If he said they were best friends, then he meant it, even if logic said that didn't work at all.

“Okay.”

“I mean it,” Mike insisted, and Dustin nodded, aware he was about to try and prove it, but then the door to the stairs opened, and he looked up to see Nancy there. Say what Mike would about her, his sister was pretty. Too bad she got all weird after dating Steve.

“What do you want?” Mike said. “We weren't being too loud, and I thought—well, it didn't even seem like you were home.”

“Not according to—”

“Shut up,” Mike hissed before Dustin could mention how the fire mage said she was out with Jonathan chasing the demogorgon.

“I know about Eleven,” Nancy said. “I know where she is right now. And I need you to come with me. No arguing. We have to leave. Right now.”

“Nancy, that's—”

“Where's Lucas?”

Lucas heard the radio buzz with static and groaned. Why hadn't he shut the damned thing off? He should have known that Mike would try and contact him. That idiot was obsessed with getting the girl back even though she clearly didn't need or want to be found. She'd gone with that creep willingly, and they were all better off for it.

He picked up the radio. “Not talking to you, Mike. This radio is going off. Over.”

“This isn't Mike,” Nancy's voice said into the radio, making him stop just before he turned it off. “This is Nancy, and we need to talk. It's

about Will.”

Lucas frowned. What was Nancy doing calling him? Why would she even bother? “Look, I don’t know what Mike promised you to get you to lie for him, but I am not talking to him or—”

“I know about Eleven. I know about the rift and the demogorgon. This is bigger than you think, and we need to work together if we’re going to stop it. And if you care about your family at all, you’d better join us, because from what we’ve seen, people who know about this stuff tend to end up dead. You need to come. Now.”

Lucas frowned. That didn’t make sense. Well, it did. If Will wasn’t dead, someone had to have faked that body or killed someone who looked like Will, though it made a lot more sense that what they’d heard on the Hamshack wasn’t real and Will was dead. Still, he knew that Mike wouldn’t have told his sister about Eleven because Nancy would have turned her over to their parents.

He didn’t know what to think. The idea of Nancy helping them was a bit crazy, but then the fire mage—or whoever the hell Nine really was—had said that she’d gone after the demogorgon, right? Not that Lucas trusted that guy, because he didn’t, but that could explain part of it. If Nine found Jonathan and Nancy and the demgorgon, they’d know where Eleven was.

“Do the words Lando Calrissian mean anything to you?”

“Of course not,” Nancy snapped. “Look, I’m not kidding about what happens to people who get on the wrong side of this. Veronica lost her whole family because of it, and the rest of us are in danger. Will is still out there, and we need to find him. We need what you know combined with what we know.”

“What does the vampire have to do with this?”

“So much more than you know, and if you call her that again, I’ll let her kick your ass.”

He snorted. “She’s in the hospital. She tried to kill herself because she’s crazy. Why would I be scared of her?”

“Because she didn't try to kill herself and she's very pissed off right now.”

“What? She's crazy and—”

“And I told you—people that know about this end up hurt.”

“Listen, Lucas, be as mad at me as you want,” Mike said, having gotten hold of the radio again, “but if this is how we find Will, we need to do it, right? And if Nancy's right about how everyone else is in trouble, too, then we need to do this.”

Lucas shook his head. He wasn't about to do anything for Mike or his precious weirdo girlfriend.

“Guys, seriously,” Dustin said, getting hold of the radio. “Do you even remember what happened on the Bloodstone Pass? We couldn't agree on what path to take, so we split up the party and those trolls took us out one by one. And it all went to shit. And we were all disabled! So we stick together. We go together. Now.”

“Please, Lucas. Just meet us outside,” Nancy repeated, and that was it.

Lucas grimaced. The last thing he wanted was to see Mike or the weirdo again, but he did want to find Will, and it seemed strange that Nancy would get involved in this if it wasn't big. Huge, even. He could at least go find out what she knew.

He grabbed a few things, shoved them in his bag, and climbed out the window. He stopped, feeling a bit nauseous again, but forced himself on down to the street and toward Mike's house. A car flashed its lights at him, and he froze.

What was this? The bad men?

Chief Hopper came around the front of the car. “Get in.”

“Lando Calrissian,” Dustin whispered, fidgeting in his seat. Mike gave him a look, but he didn't stop, not even for a second.

Lucas glared at him. “Would you shut up about Lando?”

“You said it first,” Dustin muttered, defensive. “I don't feel good about this. I don't feel good about this—”

“When do you feel good about anything?” Lucas asked, and Mike had to admit—it was rare. Dustin was their party's worrywart.

“Do not say Lando Calrissian one more time,” the police chief warned, parking his truck in front of a cabin. Mike grimaced, aware they'd had one stupid argument after another on the way here. Lucas saw Nancy failing to mention that her “we” included the chief and Mrs. Byers as a betrayal. It wasn't. Mike had been thrown by it, too, but it made sense Will's mom and the police chief wanted to help.

Besides, what real choice did they have now? They'd lost Eleven and Nine, and El had said there were bad men out there, bad men who must have hurt her and her brother and maybe even Veronica.

“This is bad,” Dustin said. “This is really bad.”

Nancy shook her head at all of them, climbing out of the truck. Mike watched as someone came out onto the porch to greet her, expecting it to be Jonathan, maybe, but that looked a lot like Barb.

“Barb's here?”

“Just get inside,” Hopper told them, and Mike forced himself to move forward. They needed to talk and to find Will. And Nancy had better not be lying about knowing where Will was or about Eleven.

Mike walked in, followed by Dustin, aware that Lucas had stayed back from them. Great. He still hadn't forgiven them. Maybe he even figured they were in on tricking them, though they hadn't known about the adults, either.

He saw Steve on the other side of the room. The older boy waved. Jonathan didn't say anything from his spot near the closed door. What was Steve doing mixed up in all this? Who'd asked him for anything?

“All right,” Hopper said as Mrs. Byers shooed Lucas in and shut the

door behind them. "We got everyone now?"

"Um, no," Mike said. "Eleven's not here or Veronica or that guy. We have to find her."

"Not again," Lucas said. "Do you even think about anything that's not tied to that girl anymore? Oh, wait. You don't."

"Guys, don't start again. Please."

Jonathan pushed the door open, and Mike looked in to see a bed. He almost ran toward it when he saw that creep lying in on it. He was going to hurt him for taking Eleven, but he stopped just inside the door, frowning. He wasn't alone in the bed. And that was so not El.

"Mike," she said, sounding happy and standing on the other side of the bed. "You're here."

"El," he said, relieved, torn between trying to go to her and just being so damned glad to see her here, safe and unharmed. "You're... okay?"

She nodded. "Brother didn't hurt me. Kept me safe."

"He did," Nancy said. "At least twice that I saw. Maybe more."

"But..."

"He showed me slushies," El said, grinning. "They were cold but good. Very good."

"Yeah, your friend had a junk food party," Steve agreed. "They really did like the slushies. He had two before he passed out."

"Okay, so the weirdos are here," Lucas said. "Tell us again why you need us?"

"Um, Lucas," Mike said. "Take a look at him."

Lucas glared at him, still unwilling to do anything Mike suggested. "How about no?"

"How about the kid's out cold and has been since that thing came at

us at Joyce's house?" Hopper said, getting everyone to look at him. "Yeah, it was there. Yeah, it's real. And yeah, we need to do something about it. We also need to find Will. She said you were tracking a rift, but she didn't explain it every well."

"So between that and the lab's tendency to kill anyone who knows about their pet projects in there," Nancy said, "we figured we should get the three of you before we made any more plans."

"The lab? This really is about Hawkins Lab?" Lucas asked. "I mean, he said it was, told us that we'd probably track the gate right to that place, but he was... he was doing his best to piss us off and why should we trust him?"

"He saved my life," Barb said. "And Nancy's. And Will's. And everyone's back at the house, from what I understand."

"Yeah, um, I'd say that's probably about fair," Steve agreed. "That thing... Well, she'd thrown Hopper's gun and it showed up and... it was really freaky. I mean... none of us were armed, and it looked like it wanted to tear us apart, and if he hadn't held it off with fire... we'd probably be dead."

Mike looked back at the kid on the bed. "He said he wouldn't help us."

"If you were talking about going right back into the lab, of course not," Veronica said. "Those assholes tortured him for years to make him what he is, and they'll kill him if he goes back. He might be able to burn it down, but it would probably mean him dying, and he's not suicidal. Not now, anyway."

"We're going to find a way to get Will and stop them that does not involve more people dying," Hopper said. "That's why we're all here. Now, what do you know about the rift?"

40. Chapter 40

Summary for the Chapter:

More planning continues.

Notes for the Chapter:

Um, it occurred to me that time-wise things didn't work again. So I went ahead and left this where it was. I may or may not know what's coming afterward...

And I'll have to remember to watch my author's notes and the whole posting thing when I'm as fried as I was yesterday. I found a couple formatting things and I wouldn't be surprised if there are more typos I can't seem to see.

October 15

The house was quiet when Will went outside.

He wasn't surprised. Veronica was the only other person around, as Jonathan and his mom were both working. He knew his mom wasn't happy about it, but Jonathan had insisted because they'd had a scare with the electricity yesterday that might mean a big bill, and any time there was one of those, his mom had to agree to let Jonathan work.

Will didn't mind when Jonathan worked, not most of the time, but today was a bit different. He wanted to ask his brother about what he'd found, and he didn't want to be home alone with Veronica, either. He would so much rather be at any of his friends' houses.

He walked into the shed, going to the drawer. Yesterday, after he'd made his discovery, he'd stashed it here, knowing it was better not to

take it into the house, and yeah, a quick check told him it was still where he'd put it the day before.

Will shut the drawer on the gun again. He knew he should ask his mom what she wanted to do about it, but she was working, as usual, and he wasn't sure that bringing it up would be a good idea after the whole power outage yesterday. His cousin was acting weird again, not that she'd ever really stopped, but she'd almost been normal watching *Tron*, and now she was more like she'd been when she was drugged and stuff.

He wished he'd been able to go to Mike's house last night. He didn't want to be here with the vampire while she was moping around, and he couldn't dare bring up the most interesting thing he'd found in years with her around, either.

She needed friends, but who was going to be friends with a vampire?

No one, that was who.

He shook his head and went back out of the shed. He stopped to pet Chester on the head. The dog whined at him, and he frowned, checking his water dish. He knew he'd fed the dog earlier, and it was too soon for his dinner, so that wasn't it. He had water in the bowl, so maybe he was just lonely. That could happen, though Will wasn't really in the mood to play with him or anything. He was still trying to figure out what to do about the gun.

He was about to go into the house when he saw Veronica in the backyard, on her hands and knees searching through the grass. He watched her do it for a few minutes before he couldn't help himself and asked the question anyway.

"What the hell are you doing?"

She looked up at him, putting a hand to her head. She shook it, going back into the house without answering him. He stood there for a second, trying to decide what the hell was wrong with her now, but he wasn't sure they'd ever figure her out. She was just too damned weird.

He saw something in the grass not far from where she'd been looking, though, and he went for it, picking it up. A lighter? What was Veronica doing with a lighter? Was she planning on burning their house down, too?

She wasn't *that* messed up, was she?

He bit his lip, trying to decide just how stupid he was. He closed his hand around the lighter and turned, going into the house. He let the screen door bang shut behind him, catching Veronica in the kitchen. She flinched and grabbed the counter, closing her eyes with a wince.

Will felt bad, seeing her like that. He walked over and set the lighter down next to her hand. She looked down at it, eyes wide, and he thought for a second she might cry or something.

She picked it up and took a breath. "Thank you."

"Yeah, whatever. Just don't burn the house down, okay?"

He stood in the middle of another town, not sure which one it was, just that it was far enough from Hawkins and large enough to experiment in, as much as he hated being like the lab and doing tests like they did. Still, he had to know he could keep disrupt the power without killing all of it and make it so that Veronica's new home was safe from the lab.

He didn't like the idea of those guards watching her. Or her aunt. They might see things they shouldn't, and he remembered hearing them laugh and joke about women around them. Others had made those kinds of jokes about him, and that was sick and wrong.

No. No one got to watch them doing stuff that was private. He would stay outside their house and ruin the power every day if he had to just to stop that.

He was hoping that he could find a way to only hurt the cameras and make them stop. If he could, then he'd do that for a day or two. He could leave them alone when no one was in the house, let the lab believe that they still worked, and that would mean they wouldn't

come out to fix them or replace them. That would keep Veronica and her family safe.

He still wished he'd been able to talk to her about leaving them. He wanted her with him, but he knew he had nothing to offer her. Bud's money was limited, and it would be gone soon enough. He could not offer her family or home. He had none of his own. He just went from place to place, much as he didn't like it.

He wanted something else, but he didn't even know what. He could only be sure of wanting her and Slushie.

He gave a moment's thought to seeking out his hamster, but he wasn't done here or in Hawkins. He had a lot to do before he could go back for him. The hamster was his first and only friend, such as it was, but that didn't mean that he had a good place for him now. Slushie deserved better, and he couldn't even leave him at the cabin because he wasn't sure when he'd be back again.

As long as Funshine fed him and held him, Slushie was safer and better off there.

Not that he felt great about all that, since it was hard to think of the only two things that mattered to him being better off without him, but they were. Veronica would have her family, and Slushie had a home with Funshine.

He had nothing. No one.

He shook his head, refusing to think about that. He'd never really had anyone before, and he'd lived. He knew he couldn't count Papa, and he didn't count Bud. Bud used him, and while he tolerated Bud, that wasn't like what Veronica had with her family that cared about him or Funshine who'd spent all his food on a hamster just because he wanted to.

He didn't have anyone who wanted him like that, never had, but then he wasn't supposed to. He was a monster, a kid who could make fire with his mind, and he liked the idea of watching the world burn, so he shouldn't have that sort of thing.

Still, he wanted Veronica.

That was probably wrong, wasn't it?

He shook his head and forced himself to concentrate on disrupting the power. He had to know that he could do this. For her.

That was a good thing, wasn't it? If he could help her? Why was all this so damned hard to know? It should be simpler than this.

He would rather not care, but he did, at least about her, and that was his damnation.

November 11

“Okay, so, in this example, we're the acrobat,” Mike said, showing his drawing to everyone. Mr. Clarke's was better, and he was no artist, but he hoped everyone could get the point. The drawing would look a lot better if Will had done it, but he wasn't here. That was why they were. “Will and that monster, they're this flea. And this is the Upside Down, where Will is hiding. Mr. Clarke said the only way to get there is through a rip of time and space.”

“A gate.”

“That we tried to track with our compasses,” Dustin said, and everyone who hadn't been there for that part—minus the guy still unconscious in the other room—looked at him. “Okay, so the gate has a really strong electromagnetic field, and that can change the directions of a compass needle.”

Hopper watched them carefully. “Is this gate underground?”

Eleven nodded. “Yes.”

“Near a large water tank?”

“Yes.”

Lucas frowned at the police chief. "How do you know all that?"

"He's seen it," Mike said, sure of it. Hopper had been inside Hawkins Lab. He'd seen the gate. He could maybe even get to it again.

"How?" Lucas asked. "And if you did—"

"Why am I not dead?" Hopper finished. "It's a damned good question that I don't have the answer to just now."

"They might have let you live so you could find us," Veronica said, and he frowned at her. "My aunt trusts you. And you're one of few people who would have believed her about him taking me out of the hospital room like that. Plus, you wanted to find him before that. You thought he was behind all this, remember? You thought he took Will even though I told you about the monster."

"Hey, in my defense, before I saw that shit, it made sense you were distorting things because you didn't want to believe he'd done anything that terrible," Hopper said. "And they did bug my place, so that could explain things. They might have been wanting to see what I'd do and if I could find anyone after that."

"What about Will?" Mrs. Byers asked. "I tried... I could talk to him before, a little, but I haven't felt like he was there. And you said he was hiding. Is there any way we can reach him? Find him? Talk to him?"

Eleven nodded. "Yes."

Mike gave her the radio he'd brought with him, hoping it would be enough. "Last time this didn't have the right range, but we ruined Mr. Clarke's Hamshack, so I don't know what else we'd use."

Eleven closed her eyes and concentrated on the radio. It gurgled a few times with static, but nothing happened. No Will. Again.

"I'm sorry." El said. Mike grimaced. He'd been afraid it wouldn't be enough, but now they knew for sure it wasn't.

"Damn it," Hopper muttered. "We need to know where he is so we can find him."

"He's in the Upside Down," Lucas said. "How much more do we need to know?"

"A lot," Barb said. "That place isn't as small as it seems."

"I went into a part that looked like the woods, but that was just a part of it," Nancy said. "It looked like it could go on for miles."

"Like home, but not home," Mike repeated, and Mrs. Byers lifted her head, looking at him. "We heard Will say that. That it was like home but not home."

"I guess you could call it that," Barb said. "It... when I first found myself in it, I was in Steve's pool, but it was empty. It was full of these... vines. Rotten. Decaying. It was gross. And that monster tried to get me but Jay set it on fire. He probably could have killed it there if I hadn't distracted him. He was pretty pissed off about it at the time. And in a lot of pain. He still helped me get away from it but we couldn't find another exit. We ended up falling asleep, and after that, he took us out his way."

"Right. He's like the flea in the example Mr. Clarke gave us."

"Dude, can we just... not call him that?" Steve asked. "I have a feeling that would go over really badly. Am I wrong, Veronica?"

She looked over at him. "Oh, to think you're almost capable of intelligent speech."

"Fine, be a bitch about it, but I'm not wrong about him, am I?"

"He would probably be pissed to hear you call him a flea," Barb agreed. "Even if it is an analogy."

Hopper looked back at the other room. "If we're going to make any attempt to reach that gate—with or without that kid—we still need to know where Will is. Maybe even more than we would if we did it with him."

"He said he could go basically anywhere with a firewalk," Veronica said. "Well, I'm not sure what its exact limits are. He said it was different here in Hawkins, took smaller fires and he'd been using it to

evade the lab since he got here—”

“How long has he been here?”

She shrugged. “I’m not sure. I think I saw him about a month ago. That night I killed that guard from the lab.”

“You killed someone?”

Veronica nodded. “I shot him because he... he threatened me and was going to drug me. He did drug me. I just... I didn’t think I’d kill him with one shot, but it did.”

“I never found a body,” Hopper said. “No sign of anyone out there but you.”

“Um, he can burn things with his mind? Maybe he burned the bodies.”

Mrs. Byers looked at Veronica. “Lonnie’s car?”

“He told me in Indianapolis that was him,” Veronica answered. “He was angry because Lonnie hurt me, but he couldn’t do anything to him because the lab was watching, so he blew up the car.”

“Awesome,” Dustin said, grinning, and Mike almost groaned.

“Remind me to thank him,” Jonathan said. The others looked at him. “What? I don’t like the man, even if he is my father. I think you all understand why. He deserved to see that car burn. He cared more about it than he did his family, that’s for damned sure.”

Veronica smiled. “Ah, so you can admit your life is shit. Good. That’s progress.”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s not as bad as you think it is, Veronica, but yeah, I have actually tried to vocalize some of my... dislike for things as they are.”

“And that’s a good thing,” she said. “Don’t stop.”

He gave her a small smile. Then he stopped. “Wait, I think we found

the gun.”

“What?”

“When we went back to get the hunting rifle from the shed, it wasn't there,” Nancy said, “but when the light shocked Jonathan, I went to get him some ice and he found a gun in the desk drawer in the shed.”

“A gun? From where? I wouldn't have put it there and your father—I didn't even want him leaving the rifle, and it was my dad's,” Mrs. Byers said. “And the light—you think that was Will?”

Jonathan nodded. “I was wondering if it was.”

“And if he found a gun out there, it could have been the one that I shot that guy with. I think I dropped it, but I don't remember much after it because he did drug me,” Veronica said. “And no, before anyone else says anything, that *happened*. I was confused about it because of the drugs, like a lot of stuff, but I know it was real.”

“What is with the drugs?” Steve asked. “Are you on them, then? Because people said—”

“I was drugged by the lab so I couldn't tell anyone what they did to my family or what I'd seen,” Veronica said. “They wanted me as bait, not to tell the truth.”

“Right.”

“Considering how much he cares about her, it's not a bad plan on their part, keeping her alive to get to him,” Barb said. “He's done a lot for her, including going to stop Jonathan and Nancy because Jonathan's her cousin and making sure that Joyce was okay after the hospital switch.”

“That doesn't help us find Will.”

“The bath.”

Mrs. Byers turned to look at El. “What?”

“I can find him,” El said. “In the bath.”

“We can't go back into the lab just for that tank,” Hop said. He knew it was too risky. If they had to, they'd use it to get Will out, but he didn't think they'd survive alive twice, even if he was aware, in a distant sick part of him, that they had leverage they could use.

The boy and the girl, they were what the lab wanted. Trading their location could possibly get them Will, but what kind of man did that? Sure, there were times when he would consider the likelihood of Joyce's boys being his, since they could have been had he not been a jealous idiot back in high school and they'd had a few moments of weakness over the years since, though they'd both been too drunk to do much about it.

“Mr. Clarke could probably tell us how to make one ourselves,” the Wheeler boy said, “but we don't have a phone out here.”

Damn it. That was the downside to being out here. He liked the distance and how it seemed safer, keeping everyone away from the monster and the lab and anywhere they were listening, but that did make things difficult, seeing as they were basically out of touch with anyone out here.

“Does that mean we're back to waiting for that guy to wake up?” Harrington asked. “How long is that going to take?”

“Realistically, could take hours,” Holland said, “and just because he might wake up doesn't mean he'd be up to doing this right away.”

“I don't think any of us wants to wait,” Joyce said. “There has to be something else we can do to get to Will sooner than this.”

“Mom, as much as we all want him back, I don't think there's anything we can do for now,” Jonathan said. “It's late, now, even if we had a phone to call the boys' teacher, and without that... we don't know how to build this bath she says she needs. We can't risk going into the lab. And most of us have gone a bit without sleep, so we could probably use some ourselves.”

“Wait, you're saying we have to go home now?” the Wheeler kid demanded. “That's—I know Mom will be upset in the morning, but if

we go home now—”

“This cabin doesn't exactly sleep a lot of people,” Hop said, looking around. They were at standing room only as it was. “That doesn't mean I think it's safe for everyone to go home. We know for sure they were watching me and the Byers house. We don't know about anyone else.”

“I think they'd have to have something on Barb's house by now,” Veronica said. “Sure, they might assume she's dead, but if Barb tried to contact her parents for any reason, they'd want to know.”

“Makes sense,” Hop agreed. They couldn't send the Holland girl home. Not yet, anyways.

“And there's a chance they know Eleven was with the boys,” Veronica added. “I mean, that agent down by the quarry didn't see her that night, but I did. And if they've been talking to their teacher—”

“We never mentioned El,” Wheeler protested. “We wouldn't do that.”

“Yeah, but Mr. Clarke saw her anyway,” Sinclair said. “Remember? That day he gave us the keys to the Hamshack? He saw us when we were about to go in and made us sit through the assembly on Will's death.”

“Lucas is right,” Henderson said. “He definitely saw her that day. We had her in the wig and the dress, but he'd remember she was there.”

“And if you heard my conversation with Will, it's possible the lab knows about that,” Joyce said. “You said you ruined the radio doing that.”

“Shit, we did,” Henderson said. “You think our parents are really in danger?”

“Don't panic,” Hop told him. “They don't actually know how much you know.”

“And if your parents buy their lies, they should be safe,” Veronica said. “Mine only died because I refused to accept them. It... It was my fault. I didn't want to let him go back to them or think he was just

what they said he was. He was so much more than that. They... they didn't even let him be human. He was just a number, an experiment, but it was also so wrong... and he didn't even understand that... he'd had no one treat him kindly before me. The lab experimented on him, Bud used him, and other men hurt him. He thought that was just how life was, and I wanted him to know it was better... it cost me my parents and everything else... My parents had believed the lies they told them. If I had..."

"Well, for everyone's sake, we're probably going to end up pretending we buy the lies unless we can find a way to stop them for good," Hop said. "I'll be stuck pretending I drank too much and took too many pills and have no idea what the hell went down in that lab, you all will be stuck pretending that Will and Barbara were taken by a sick man instead of an actual monster, and you won't be able to say anything about what either of them can do."

"Be... normal?" Eleven asked, sounding confused. "That... possible?"

"You're still human," Joyce said. "And you could be someone's daughter, have a real life besides what you can do and the experiments. Both you and your brother deserve a chance to have a life and a family and... and so many other things."

Hop had a feeling her family would increase by one if Joyce had anything to say about it, but they were struggling as it was.

"The lab might have too much of a foothold here for you to stick around," Hop warned the girl. "Though we can still find a place for you to be safe."

"No," Veronica said. "They'll be watching for them. They found him in Ohio and killed Bud because of it. Not that he was any loss, from the sound of it, but we're going to need more than just cover stories and distance."

"Could always... burn it... the fuck... down."

"You're awake," Veronica said, well aware she was stating the obvious and sounding like an idiot, but she ran over to embrace him

anyway. He grunted, and she winced, realizing she'd hurt him, but she'd been so worried about him, coming in the way he had and looking like death. She wasn't sure he would wake up, and this was too soon, but she was relieved all the same.

"Yeah, well... you talk... too loud. All... of... you," he said, stumbling as he took another step into the room. She propped him up and helped him over to the couch, where Barb made sure he had a spot to sit.

"You sure you should be awake?"

"Food," Eleven said, shoving a bag of chips at him. He took it and started eating, ignoring Hopper's question. "Feel better after."

"Not... fucking... likely."

"He will probably have to go back to sleep after he's eaten a bit," Barb said. "That's how it seems to go, at least so far."

He nodded, pointing a chip at her to acknowledge the truth of her words, saying nothing as he ate. Veronica reached over to brush back his hair, and he smiled up at her, still inhaling his chips.

"We were trying to figure out what to do without using what you can do," Joyce told him. "I don't think you're up to doing much, but my son is still out there, and we have the lab to worry about. Eleven says she can find Will using the bath—"

"Fuck no," he said, staring at her. "What... the hell... why would... you ever... get back... in that thing... hand yourself... to them... No."

"We think Mr. Clarke could tell us how to build one of our own," Mike said, "and she wants to help find Will, which is more than you've done."

Her pyro reached up and flipped him off. "Would be dead... if not burned... monster... so fuck you."

"You saved Will?" Joyce asked, and he nodded. "Then... you've seen him? He's alive?"

He winced, finishing off the chips and taking a candy bar from Eleven as she shoved it in his face. "First night... yes. Not since. I... forced it away... put fire barrier... around house... told him... run... he did. Don't know... where he is now."

"I can find him," Eleven said. "Need... more than the radio. Need... bath."

He shuddered. "No. Not... that."

"What did they do to you in that thing?" Hopper asked. "According to Terry's sister it was just some sensory deprivation to open the mind—with some drugs—is that what bothers you so much about it? The drugs?"

He finished the candy bar and took another bag of chips from Eleven. "Was failure. Never... made it work... just... punished... when it didn't."

"Damn," Steve said. "How bad?"

Jay frowned, taking out a cigarette, and lighting it with a look.. "Fuck, that hurts. Guess... your hair... is safe. Idiot."

Dustin burst out laughing, and Steve looked at him, causing the younger boy to sober up a little. "Sorry. He's funny."

Veronica smiled at that. She could like Dustin. She wasn't so sure about the other two. Mike was a bit self-righteous for her taste and Lucas was far too skeptical. Then again, they were Will's friends, and Will still hated her.

"Whatever we do, we're going to have a plan, and we're going to keep everyone safe while we do it," Hopper said. "Saving Will does not mean killing everyone else in the process of getting him back. Everyone here has put themselves at risk—"

"I didn't."

"You would have hit us with the car," Eleven told Steve. "You owe us, Mouthbreather."

"We're not here to argue," Hopper said. "We're here to fix this mess. I don't give a shit who owes who. We all share a basic goal—and if you say you don't, Harrington, I'm going to give him a lighter to deal with your hair—and that's getting Will back. This is bigger than Will, though, with that lab putting us all at risk. They let that thing loose, and they're not doing a damned thing to stop it."

Jay laughed. "You think... they give... a fuck... what it does? They don't... care about... anyone in this town... except maybe her. The rest of you... can all die... and they... won't stop it."

"So we have to stop a monster and an evil lab and save Will. Anything else?"

"Not die?"

"That, too."

"And we still have nothing that does that, right? Because he looks like he's going to pass out again, we have no idea how to stop the lab besides burning it down, which we can't do right now, and we don't know where Will is, either."

Veronica frowned. "Why are you all looking at him like it's his responsibility to fix this? He didn't let that thing loose."

"No, but he could have burned it down before, right?" Lucas asked, watching her pyro for a reaction.

"Tried once... didn't work so well," Jay answered. He leaned back, closing his eyes. "Government would... just do it again."

"Yeah, but they'd be missing a lab, their scientists, and their experiments," Mike said. "That would at least delay them, right?"

He snorted. "They... hunt me... Take Veronica... as bait... you think... it ends... with a building? Freak from a lab... and still know more... than you... about the world..."

"What about Brenner?" Hopper said. "You think he's replaceable?"

"Brenner?" Eleven asked with a frown.

“Papa,” Jay told her, and she flinched. He turned his head toward Hopper. “Wanted... believe... killing him... was enough... not sure... There are always... more... and he... he would bring in... others. Ones who... watched experiments. Important... people...”

“So we'd have to get at the backers, too.”

“The fuck... do I know? Am... freak from lab.”

“You're smarter than you think,” Veronica told him. “Smarter than he let you think you were or allowed you to be in that place. Everything you've done since you met me to stay ahead of them and trick them—you're smart. And I bet you piss them off daily.”

He gave her a weak smile. “That's something.”

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. “Come on. You need to sleep some more.”

“Snuggle?”

“Yeah.”

41. Chapter 41

Summary for the Chapter:

Things happen outside of Hawkins.

The morning comes and they try to make good on the bath plan.

Notes for the Chapter:

So I didn't want to spend a long time on the sleeping arrangements or any longer on November 11, admittedly. It took a very long time to get through that day.

I did touch on a plot that I'm sure seems abandoned, but I haven't had a good place to get back to it, that's all. As it is, he's safely away from all of this and no longer a catalyst for the funeral as much as I enjoyed seeing Joyce throw him out of the house. So it hasn't been necessary to revisit Lonnie yet, which I was glad for as he was unpleasant to write for.

And I knew this was where I wanted the chapter to reach and end, but it was hard to do and not nearly as good as I wanted to be even after days trying to get it done. I think it made a strange sort of sense to do it like this, though.

October 16

Lonnie wasn't expecting to see anyone from Hawkins at the bar that night, not any night for that matter. He'd left everything back there behind without a regret. He didn't need Joyce's nagging, and most of the time when he looked at those kids, he didn't think they were his. Neither of them were anything like him, and he wouldn't put

anything past Joyce.

Jonathan was probably Hopper's brat, and since she'd been with him before she took up with Lonnie, and it was no secret Hopper never got over her. Lonnie didn't figure Joyce was over him, either, but back when they first started, he'd only cared about one thing with her, and he got what he wanted.

He hadn't expected that to saddle him for life, but Jonathan came along and screwed over both of them. He'd ended up married and Joyce had done all she could to drag him down, never seeing anything but the kid, and who the hell wanted to deal with that?

Not him, but he was in a small town where people who got married stayed married and miserable. He'd done that for years, dulling the pain with a few drinks and a couple other women, finding he was pretty popular with girls the same age as Joyce had been when they first started dating, and he didn't mind that one bit. Younger was better in his mind. He liked girls without the mileage and the baggage, who hadn't lost their looks like Joyce or become all obsessed with kids like she had.

He sat back with his beer, just wanting to enjoy the night. He'd start with a beer, and then he'd get something stronger, and maybe he'd pick up a new girl. Cynthia was starting to irritate him, and he could use a night away from her. She seemed to think moving in together meant more than it did, like maybe he'd marry her dumb ass, but it wasn't going to happen. He wasn't doing that bullshit again.

"Well, if it isn't Lonnie Byers," Rudy Handler said, sitting down next to him at the bar. "Haven't seen you in a few years. Not since Joyce ran your ass off."

Lonnie glared at him. "Joyce didn't run anyone anywhere. She's not capable of that."

"I don't know. See you two go at it before. She gave almost as good as she got."

Lonnie snorted. The hell she did. "What do you want, Rudy?"

“Nothing. Just saw you and figured I'd say hello.”

Yeah, right. No one just said hello for the fun of it. Rudy had something he wanted to say, but he wasn't saying it.

“Strange to think about Marion, isn't it?”

Lonnie frowned. He hadn't given two fucks about his sister-in-law for years. She wasn't willing to part with a damned cent, just that once, and she was so stuck up and pretentious with her big house and husband that he hated her more than Joyce did.

“What about her?”

“She's dead.” Rudy looked glad to be telling it, like he had been waiting to spill this to someone who it would matter to, and Lonnie was the closest thing to that. Stupid small towns. Only gossip mattered there. “Yeah, she burned up in her house with her rich husband. Only one that made it out was their daughter.”

“Veronica's alive?”

Rudy nodded. “And living with your ex. Freaky thing about it? She looks almost exactly like Joyce does. Like a twin.”

“Like I care,” Lonnie said. “Joyce can take in whatever poor little orphan she wants. Not my problem now.”

Rudy snorted. “This one's not poor. Marion had money, right? And doesn't that all go to the kid? So, yeah. She's one rich little orphan.”

Lonnie waved the bartender over and ordered his whiskey, needing a stronger drink and some time to think about this. If Veronica really did have Marion's money, then Joyce had it, and didn't Joyce owe him a thing or two?

Yeah, she did. He knew who he'd be calling first thing tomorrow.

He was tired of testing. He thought he knew what to do now, but he was so tired from the practicing that he needed to sleep for days. He was ready to do it now, but he knew he wasn't anywhere safe for

that, and he couldn't afford to sleep anywhere in a strange town.

He'd done that before and he woke up very sorry for it, and never again would he be that stupid. He hadn't known that people were like that, and it was not the sort of lesson he needed to learn more than once, though the act itself had some repetition he didn't want to think about. He didn't know why he'd even let his mind go there, but he was tired and not thinking right.

He needed to get back to the cabin, but he'd also need food, and he couldn't make the trip yet. He was not strong enough.

He thought about taking a bus again, but he didn't want to risk that, either. He needed somewhere he could rest safely for a hour or two and then eat and be on his way. He knew there were cheap motels around that would take his money for an hour and that should give him some privacy, but in his experience not enough safety.

He swore, getting a look from some ladies crossing the street. He shook his head. They didn't understand. He knew too much about the bad side of this kind of place, and he had never gone to sleep in a place like this without someone trying to steal from him or worse. A few had even tried to kill him. He had Bud's money, and that was dangerous. People would want it. They'd hurt him—or try to—and some would kill for it.

He couldn't afford to sleep here.

He would rather have experimented somewhere closer to Veronica, but he hadn't wanted to risk the lab finding him before he was in control of what he needed to help her. And her family. He didn't want those people watching them to see anything.

And if he got it right, he could maybe even stay around her long enough to talk to her, to find out if she wanted to come with him. He could make the cameras go away. He wasn't sure about the other microphones because they didn't need power the same way as the cameras, not that he could tell. He wasn't really sure as he'd never taken one of them apart to play with, though he'd destroyed plenty of cameras around this place.

He went down the street and into the store, gathering up a bunch of food and shoving it in his basket, making sure he collected as much as he could that he could eat easily and didn't have to cook as he still knew nothing about that. He should learn, but he had to do more important things like keep Veronica safe first.

And maybe if she came with him, she'd teach him?

That seemed like something they might like. Something in their future of traveling the world and seeing other places they'd never been before, maybe, if they even had one.

He needed to talk to her, though, because he couldn't keep making plans if he was never going to actually do them. He would make other plans if he couldn't be with her, though admittedly, most of them seemed to end in flames and death.

If he didn't have a future, he might as well take a few of them with him.

November 12

"That was admittedly one of the most uncomfortable nights I've ever spent," Joyce said, and Hop nodded, feeling about the same. His body wasn't as young as it used to be, and a night on the floor did no one, not even the younger crowd. They'd done their best to make the space they had comfortable for the group they had, clearing up as much as they could and rearranging things, but honestly, the only people who got much sleep out of that had to be Veronica and that Dean kid, as they'd shared the bed. Hop knew if they didn't need what that boy could do as much as they apparently did, that would never have happened.

As the adults and parents here, it was a little strange to be approving of that sort of thing, even if Hop knew full that the clothes had stayed on all night and they hadn't done anything—would have been hard to, considering they weren't alone in the room, but the kid had also been out cold again and still was, not stirring even as the others did

around him. Them. Veronica had a near death grip on the boy, and she wasn't going anywhere even if Hop was pretty sure she'd woken up more than once during the night and was even awake now.

He forced his eyes back to his companion. Joyce looked as worse for the wear as he felt. "I don't feel like repeating it, that's for damned sure. My days of camping out are long since gone."

Joyce gave him a halfhearted smile, rubbing her neck. "Oh, I think there's still some life left in you yet, Jim Hopper."

He smiled back, a bit tempted to show her but knowing this was far from the time or the place, even if that smile was a bit baiting.

The silence stretched on between them, the awkwardness of not saying something to that making it worse. Damn, he wanted to say a hell of a lot to her, but he knew that he couldn't right now. They had to find her son—and Will had better not be dead at this point—and find a way to stop Brenner and the lab. If it was just Brenner, Hop figured they had a plan—not a good one, not a legal or even moral one—and that would be it, but as the kid pointed out, Brenner had backers in the government.

This thing wasn't going away easily.

"We'll need to talk to that teacher of theirs and find somewhere to set up the bath where they can't find it. Plus... we can't spend another night here, not all of us."

Joyce nodded. "We can't go back to my house. They're definitely watching it, and they might have gone back into your place to bug it again since you found the first one. If they're as determined to get those kids as we think they are—and they are, they tried to kill her just to get to him—they won't quit."

He saw that look on her face and grimaced. This wasn't what he wanted at all when he changed the subject. "Hey. Look at me."

She did, biting her lip. He could see it all, the fear, the worry, the near desperation that was forcing her back toward the edge she'd been fighting all this time.

“We're going to find him.”

She winced. “It wasn't that. It—I know we're close to Will. I know it, but I—talking about your house reminded me that... they could easily have killed you already. And if they had—”

“They didn't.”

“They could have.”

“Yeah, but I'm still here, and we're still fighting. It's what we do, Joyce. Remember?”

She nodded.

“Busted again?” Hop asked as he sat down on the bench next to Joyce. She gave him a look, and he shrugged, knowing it was a case of pot calling kettle and all. He was here because he'd mouthed off to Coach Smith again. He couldn't help it. The guy was such a dick.

“Coach again?”

“Yup. What about you? Mrs. Baker again?”

Joyce looked away, and he knew he was right. He reached into his pocket and took out a cigarette, passing it to her under her hand so no one would see it. She took it, and he saw her lips curving into a smile.

“Why do you think we keep doing it? Fighting?”

He shrugged. He figured that question was more to do with her parents and the mess she was in with them, and he knew she had to be strong for that, so he couldn't say much. “It's what we do.”

“Yeah,” she whispered, the distance between them growing again, “it is.”

Hop wondered if she was remembering that or something else, but he gave into the impulse and pulled her in for a brief hug all the same. He was still holding her when someone coughed behind them. Shit, that got awkward fast.

“Morning, Jonathan.”

“I think everyone's starting to wake up,” Jonathan said. “And we're going to have to do something about food and... other things.”

He knew he was focusing a bit too much on the practical again, but that was easier than thinking about how crazy everything was right now, how messed up his feelings for Nancy were, or the possible implications of the hug he'd just walked in on.

Hopper seemed decent enough, and his mom was dealing with a lot, but that didn't make the situation any less weird for Jonathan, who would rather forget he saw that.

“There's going to be one hell of a line for the bathroom,” Hopper agreed. “Unless no one objects to boys going outside to do their business.”

His mom snorted. “Hopper, since when has that ever bothered me? Do I look like some delicate feminine flower here?”

“You didn't look like that when you had to wear skirts for school,” he told her, grinning, and Jonathan really felt uncomfortable now.

“Food,” he blurted out, feeling stupid. “What are we going to do about food?”

“A drive-thru might be a simple enough solution, if this shithole town has one,” Veronica said, coming into the room. “I don't remember. Does it?”

Hopper shook his head. “Best place to eat around here was Benny's.”

Jonathan saw his mom flinch. “Benny. I heard, but I was so caught up in Will I didn't think... Hop, I'm so sorry. I know he was your friend.”

“What happened?” Jonathan asked, not sure he'd heard about that.

“I don't know. Maybe we should ask your friend,” Hop said to Veronica, who frowned.

“Not sure when... became designated... asshole,” Veronica's boyfriend

muttered, coming up to her and holding on like he might fall down without her help. "But wasn't... me."

Hopper stared him down. "You were there that day. Ate a bunch of food, more than you should be able to as thin as you are."

"Fuck you," he said. "Just because... was there... don't mean... shit. And... I paid... for the food."

"Then what the hell happened to Benny?"

"Ask Eleven."

"What?"

"Benny... was nice," Eleven said, peeking around the guy's coat. Her face betrayed her guilt and shame, even a bit of fear. "He... gave me food. The blonde... she..."

She lifted a hand and mimicked a gun. Hopper swore, and Jonathan saw his mom wince.

"What blonde?"

"Favorite... agent... works for lab. Bitch... wants me dead," Veronica's boyfriend said. "She... does... all the dirty... work."

"She's the one who drugged me after the fire, the one who drugged me the night Will disappeared, the same one that almost killed me," Veronica said, shuddering, and her boyfriend held on tighter to her, whispering in her ear. "Shut up. You are not dying for me."

"No one's dying on my watch, not if I can do anything about it," Hopper said. "You still determined to make this bath thing we talked about yesterday?"

Eleven nodded. "Yes. Need it to find Will."

"How are we going to contact that teacher and keep everyone safe?" Jonathan asked. "We can't do it here, and if we go back to any of our houses, it will probably get us caught."

“And if they know the boys fried the radio they might be onto Mr. Clarke, too, since it was his radio, right?” Veronica asked. “They could be watching him, too.”

“They monitor... all phone calls. All... radio calls,” her boyfriend said. “Heard... it once... trying to get free... so many voices...”

“You told me about that,” Veronica said, reaching up to touch his cheek. “When you warned me they'd be listening to us.”

He nodded against her shoulder.

“Then they probably know a hell of a lot more than we want them to,” Hopper said, looking over at Joyce. “Too much, even.”

“They already destroyed her mind, Hop. I don't think they can do much worse to her,” Joyce said, and Jonathan frowned at her. “Remember we said we had someone else we wanted to see about this, someone who might have more information? We tried to, but she was... brain dead, in a way, and she couldn't help.”

“Her sister gave us some details. We know a bit more about how Brenner got his start, and we have a line on where some of those kids—like you two—might have come from.”

The boy snorted. “You think even... if I had parents... they'd want me... like this? Fuck that.”

“I think some people would find what you can do amazing, both of you, and you deserve so much better than a lab,” Joyce told them. “And we are going to work on that, but first we have to make it safe for everyone.”

“Which means a couple of us going to a phone, getting the information we need, and then we'll go from there,” Hopper said. “We'll need the boys for that. And you should probably go back to bed, kid.”

The pyro flipped him off, but Veronica took him by the hand and led him to the other room, a bag of chips in hand.

Nancy eyed the now empty room and sighed. The boys had all insisted on going to see Mr. Clarke, not that she was surprised, even if they were still arguing among themselves. Mrs. Byers had gone with them, too, and Jonathan was outside somewhere. Veronica had gotten her boyfriend back in bed, and she thought Barb and Eleven were still asleep.

She hadn't even managed to keep her eyes closed for more than a few minutes, and she was tired, but she knew they'd have a lot to do once the boys were back.

She took a spot on the floor against the wall, not sure she trusted that couch. It was probably as old as this place was, and while Mrs. Byers had slept on it, that didn't mean it would stay together now.

"Hey," Steve said, sitting down next to her, and Nancy tried to find a way to react to that. She didn't know why he made her tense—it wasn't like she and Jonathan had done anything wrong, just dangerous and a bit stupid—so she didn't have to feel guilty or like she'd betrayed him. She wasn't guilty.

"Hey."

"You still mad at me? I mean, we never got to talk about things after everyone showed up," Steve said. "I know that maybe the movie was not the best choice, but I was trying to make you feel better."

She nodded. "I know."

He frowned. "You know, there's a part of me that thinks maybe I'm the one who should be mad here. You lied to me."

She snorted. "No, I didn't. Everything I said was true. It was crazy. Things were bad for Mike—though I didn't know he was acting weird because of Eleven, not just Will. And I was worried about Barb and about Veronica. I didn't tell you what Jonathan and I were planning on doing because you would have tried to stop me, but I wasn't going to be stopped. I wanted to find Barb. I knew that it wasn't just a prank, that the monster was real, and I wasn't going to be talked out of looking for it or her, especially when Mrs. Byers and Hopper were going somewhere else instead of after that thing."

Steve grimaced. "Do you have any idea how dangerous that was? That thing—the fire barely seemed to stop it."

"I'm aware of how dangerous it is," Nancy almost snapped. She hadn't slept at all last night. She kept seeing... that thing. She'd had to lie in place without any way of making herself feel better, and she knew that he probably hadn't liked that she'd ended up in the other room—sharing the cramped space with the bed with Barb and Eleven instead of him—and she'd wanted to run. She didn't, because she would have woken everyone, and she knew they were basically as safe as they could be here, but she still hadn't slept.

"Don't get mad at me for caring."

"You could care in a less condescending way," Veronica said. "Not every girl is some wilting flower who needs to be protected by her man."

Steve frowned back at her. "No one asked you."

"Can hear you... through the whole... damned place, so fuck... silence," Jay said, sitting down. Nancy wasn't sure Jay fit the guy, but Barb used it and she liked it better than Nine, like Eleven called him. "So much for rest."

"Eat something," Barb said, shoving more junk food at him. He gave her a smile. It died when Eleven joined him on the couch.

"Go away."

She ignored him, taking a chip from his bag and munching down on it. "Think they'll bring slushies?"

"I don't think most people like them as much as you two do," Barb told her, and she looked up at her with a frown. "Adults think it's just sugar and really bad for you."

"Tastes good."

Steve shook his head. "Can we go outside and finish this conversation?"

Nancy didn't want to, as much as they probably should. "Steve, if this is a part of me you can't accept, there's nothing else to say. I might not have known it last week, but I do now. I'm someone who will fight for the people she loves. I'll risk my own life and do whatever it takes. Barb is like a sister to me, and I... all of this has changed us. Not just me. All of us, from my brother and his friends to Chief Hopper and the Byers and Veronica and Barb and... it's different now. Everything is. What we know of the world has changed, what we know of us... I'm not sure we can go back to the people we were."

"Some of us don't want to," Veronica said. "I don't ever want to be that lost and confused again."

"You won't be," Jay told her. "You're stronger... than you know."

He kissed her forehead, and as messed up as this whole thing was, Nancy thought that was rather sweet and a bit more like what she wanted for herself, someone who'd think she could do more even when she couldn't.

She already had that in a best friend. She knew she'd almost lost that, almost thrown it away, but she was never going to do that again. She would not take Barb or anyone else for granted.

"Do you still have that kiddie pool we bobbed for apples in?" Dustin asked as he climbed back into the truck. Joyce frowned, not sure what to make of that, but at least she knew they'd gotten the answers they needed from Mr. Clarke. She hadn't gone in with the boys, neither she or Hop had gone in, thinking it best not to, not under the circumstances.

At this point, she didn't know what part of their paranoia would keep them safe and what wouldn't, but the fewer people that knew they were all working together, the better, or so she assumed Hop thought.

"I think so," Joyce answered. She wasn't sure if it was still any good, but she didn't get rid of things that could work again. She knew she couldn't afford to replace them. "Yeah."

“Good,” Dustin told her. “Then we just need salt.”

Lucas nodded. “Lots of it.”

Hop frowned. “How much is 'lots?’”

“Fifteen hundred pounds.”

Joyce stared at the boys. That was insane. They couldn't just get that from the nearest store. “Where are we going to get that much salt?”

“I've got an idea, but I'll need at least one of the older boys for that,” Hop said. “And we're going to have to get that pool from your house.”

Joyce winced. “Let's save that for last, since we know that place isn't safe.”

“Just bring the fire mage,” Dustin said. “You'll be fine.”

Hop blinked. “The what?”

Joyce frowned. That was a bit familiar, in a weird way. She'd obsessed over everything Will told her, so she hadn't forgotten, but she didn't know what to think of it before now. “Will mentioned a fire mage when we spoke. I... I wasn't sure what he meant, it sounded crazy. But if this boyfriend of Veronica's—”

“Nine.”

“—showed Will his ability to use fire, then he'd call him something he knew, like from that game the boys are always playing,” Joyce explained. “And while it's true we probably don't want to do much around the house without him, as he's the only one we know can hurt that thing, he was still pretty weak this morning.”

She also didn't want to bring him by her house since the lab was watching it as part of a trap for him, but she knew they didn't dare face that thing without something to use against it, and she didn't think a lighter would be enough. Maybe a blow torch, but they didn't have one those right now, either.

"Maybe we'll get to see him in action again," Dustin said. "Because, you know, it was pretty awesome."

Mike frowned at him. "He almost set me on fire."

"Dude, he put up a wall of fire to block you from going at him," Lucas said. "Get over yourself already and accept that the weirdo chose him. Don't even know why you're acting so damned jealous. She says he's her brother, not her boyfriend, like you clearly want to be."

"I don't want to—"

"You do," Hop said, cutting him off. "And you're what, twelve? Give it a rest for a few more years. There's still time for that."

"You're not my dad."

"No, your dad is a worthless lump in a recliner," Hop said. "And I don't want the three of you to start arguing again, are we clear? Good. Now I'm going to drive us back to the cabin, and I don't want a word from any of you."

"Nice job."

"It wasn't—"

"What the hell did I just say? Silence. Now."

Jonathan felt a hand on his arm, looking over to see his cousin standing there. He didn't know why she was here instead of with her boyfriend, and it was strange to see her here. She was a bit of a mess again, though not with the same haunted look in her eyes. She seemed stronger now, despite almost dying. He didn't know what to think of that.

"You can come in now," she said. "I don't think you'll be forced to watch any uncomfortable displays of affection. She gave him some stuff to think about, and he's thinking. So's she."

"I'm not hiding out here because of her."

“What, because Hopper has a thing for your mom?”

He frowned. “Don't say it like that. And even if he did—it's not—I mean, I'm not a little kid anymore. My days of dreaming of a better dad are long since gone. I never really thought Lonnie would be that guy, and I know he's not going to be. I've known that for a long time. I don't know how I'd feel about her dating Hopper, but she's not. He's been helping her. They're friends. That's it.”

Veronica took out a cigarette, putting it to her lips and digging in her pocket. It lit up without her finding her lighter, and she leaned back toward the door. “You're supposed to be resting, you idiot.”

“You're welcome.”

She shook her head, smiling a little.

“That doesn't bother you at all?” Jonathan asked. “What he can do and what he's capable of? You're never going to have a normal life.”

She leaned toward him. “It's cute that you think this is already a set and sealed forever type deal, but we haven't really done much future planning.”

Jonathan frowned. “You seem—”

Veronica drew back, raising her voice. “But no, it doesn't bother me. I don't want normal. I mean, it's not like we can't have pieces of it, but normal fucking sucks. I saw it in my parents who were so locked in a routine I don't even know if they knew how to live outside of it anymore. We had money, and we weren't scraping by for every meal, and that sounds great in theory, but they were distant, like affection was perfunctory, expected, and the only time they seemed to care was when they were laying down the law about him. They didn't care what I did with the Heathers. Your mom might fuss and work too much and be scatterbrained and rely on you too much for everything, but at least she really cares and you don't have to see it in a crisis. You've always known or you wouldn't put up with half the shit you do.”

He did know his mom loved them. That was why it was so hard

sometimes to watch her break over and over again trying to provide for them.

"We're family. It's not... you don't just turn your back when it gets hard."

"I'm not saying you should," Veronica said. "The whole point is not giving up on the stuff that matters. That's why we're all still here, why everyone's still fighting to find Will and get him back, and why we're going to stop that lab."

Jonathan nodded. He looked over at the road as the chief's truck came up the lane. He found himself tensing up until the truck stopped and his mom got out.

"I'm going to need you and the Harrington kid to help me move a bunch of salt," Hopper said, and Jonathan frowned. "It's for this bath thing we're making."

"Okay, fine."

"And I suppose you think that you can leave everyone but Eleven, Jonathan, and Steve here while you get this bath ready?" Veronica asked, folding her arms over her chest. "Because that is so not happening. We are all in this together now, none of this leaving us behind for our own protection bullshit."

"Veronica," his mom said, wincing. "We're not sure how long it will take to get the salt, and we have to gather other things as well, so it's better if some of us stay here."

"No," Barb said, coming to the door. "I don't think so. I've been staying here hiding to keep my family safe, but I want to do something to help, too. And Nancy does, and we're all still safer if we're together, aren't we?"

"It would be a whole lot harder for them to fake a suicide or a body for this many people," Nancy said. "I think we're better off all together."

Hopper looked like he might fight it again, but he didn't. He shook his head, grumbling under his breath. "Fine. The older boys are with

me. Joyce can drive Jonathan's car. Let's go get us some damned salt."

"Quit pushing."

"You quit pushing."

"Guys."

"I swear, if the three of you don't knock it off, I'm going to find somewhere along this road to abandon you," Hopper said, and Steve could see how stressed he was getting. The boys had been kind of at each other the entire time, even when he and Jonathan were out helping Hopper move the salt for the roads into the back of the truck.

It was enough to make anyone wish they'd been able to ride in the other car with the girls. Or that they hadn't left Steve's car at the other house because they were kind of crammed in now.

"Let me get this straight," Steve said, since Jonathan was doing his best to ignore all of it, and he seemed way too damned good at that. "You three are fighting because he likes a girl?"

"Don't start, Harrington."

"It's not just because of El. She didn't do anything wrong."

"Uh, yeah, she did," Lucas said. "She lied to us, used us, and she threw me into concrete with her mind. She did a lot of stuff wrong."

"She was just trying to protect us. Going to the gate isn't safe. We know that now. We know where it is and why she wanted to keep us away from it," Mike said. "She was trying to help. She got Nine there, didn't she? And we need him to get Will back."

"Excuse your feelings for this girl on Will all you want, but you have acted like an irresponsible idiot since she showed up. You believe every word out of her mouth even when we have proof she lied. What is it going to take to wake you up to the fact that you can't just blindly accept or excuse what she did?"

“She was trying to—”

“Not again, Mike. Please. Just let it go.”

“I’m gonna say something here,” Steve began, “and I know that none of you want to hear it, but we’re talking possible end of the world case scenario here. Monsters running loose, people missing and dying, a lab that can have you killed and people don’t even know the truth, and you’re going to spend what might be your last few hours arguing with your friends over something both of you need to let go? Yeah, she lied. And yeah, she did some... messed up stuff, but she doesn’t know right from wrong in the same way you idiots do. I think we all can acknowledge that. And before you over there start crowing that you were right—you’re not. It’s messed up to side with someone who lies and hurts your friends over those friends.”

“And you’re an expert on this?” Jonathan asked. “You hang out with Tommy H and Carol.”

Steve shook his head. “Not anymore I don’t. So maybe it took me a while to see what jerks they were, and maybe I was living the lie of the friendship I thought I had, but at least I know it now. And... I’m sorry about the camera. That was low, and I shouldn’t have done it, even if you were being creepy about Nancy.”

Jonathan looked at him. “Like you have never had a moment of weakness when it comes to her. Okay, I admit it, the wrong part of me was doing the thinking right then, but I never meant to keep those photos. I developed them in case there was something I missed. Veronica saw something that night. We were hoping to prove it. And I did, no thanks to you tearing it up.”

“What?”

“Yeah, that thing, the monster, it was in the picture I took of Barb. It’s right behind her. I must have snapped it just before it took her. I didn’t even know.”

“You have the demogorgon on film?” Dustin asked. “That’s awesome.”

Jonathan shook his head. "Not really."

"But we at least could prove it existed," Mike said. "For the people that still doubt it."

Steve frowned at him. "Aren't you one of them? You were giving that guy a lot of crap for not helping even though we said he'd fought it off for us."

"I am not. I believe the demogorgon exists."

"It's just another case of him being blinded by the girl because he can't see past how she was 'taken' by him and 'hurt' by him and—"

"Yeah, but you don't trust him, either," Dustin said. "You didn't want to take his word for anything."

"I'm not in this case. She said she wanted to go. She went. She said he didn't hurt her," Lucas said. "I'm... Shit. I'm taking the weirdo's word for it."

"Ha," Dustin said in triumph. "See? Now the two of you have to shake."

"How long will it take to find this pool?" Hopper asked, eyeing the house warily. Barb didn't think any of them wanted to be here, not after that thing had showed up here. She had to figure most of them were only along because that was where Jay was, their one known weapon that could fight against that thing.

No one wanted to be far from him, and he wasn't about to be far from those he'd apparently chosen to protect—Veronica, her family, Barb, and now Eleven. He would have been the deciding voice if they hadn't already settled it before he got to the door.

"It shouldn't be long," Joyce said. "It's in the shed, right, Jonathan?"

He nodded. "I think so. It would almost have to be."

"Then we'll start there," Hopper said. "No one go into the house unless you have to. Stay by the cars. I'd rather you were in the cars in

case we need to leave in a hurry, but I know there's not enough room in the two of them."

"We can shift things around now," Steve said, holding up his keys. "My car's here, we'll make it three. I know that's not idea, but it would mean less crowding, right?"

"Right," Hopper said, and he turned to go toward the shed, but then he stopped, tensing up and reaching to his holster. Nancy had given him the gun she had, but Barb was hoping no one would have any reason to use it.

"What is it?" Jonathan asked. "I know there was mold there, but the lights aren't on. It's not here."

"Listen," Hopper said, and Barb heard it then, what had caught his ear. An engine rumbling up the dirt drive. Someone was coming.

"That's the only road in or out of here," Mrs. Byers said. "And there are trees. Lots of trees. I don't think we can get any of the cars through them."

"This is bad," Dustin said. "This is so bad."

"Don't fucking look at me," Jay said. "I mean it. Stop looking at me. Unless you really want me to burn down the whole forest, but I don't think you do."

Eleven pushed past him, stepping out in front of the rest of them, and Barb heard Mike yell at her not to just as the van came part way into view. It flew up in a blur of white, lifted like it was a Hot Wheels toy one of the boys was playing with, and flipped over, landing with a loud crash and scrape against the gravel, blocking the driveway.

"Holy shit," Lucas said as Mike rushed over to Eleven's side, catching her as she collapsed.

Barb went forward with the others, needing to make sure the girl was all right after that. She tried to get a look, but everyone was crowded around, and she couldn't see much.

"Is she okay?"

“Yeah,” Mike said. “She’s just... she’s just weak.”

“And stupid,” Jay muttered, getting a few glares. “She threw all her energy into that and all it does is stop them for a few minutes. What happens when they get out of their vans and start shooting? Because it’s going to happen any minute now.”

“They’ve done that before,” Hopper said, no question in his words. “Through the fire, right?”

Jay nodded. He winced. “Fine. Top stupid with stupid.”

“What?”

“Grab hold of each other. Now.”

“No,” Veronica protested, and Barb was right there with her. “That’ll kill you. There’s too many of us and you’re still recovering... you only barely started doing normal sentences again.”

“We don’t have much other choice. It’s this or burn the whole thing down in a fire, and that isn’t much better for me and not really safe for any of you. Grab on. Now.”

“This is such a bad idea,” Barb said. “We need you too much to let you—”

“Shut up,” he said, and someone must have grabbed hold of her because one second there was a red flash and the next, they were back in the dark world.

This was the last place she wanted to be, and she knew she didn’t dare look over at him. He had to be dead after that, didn’t he?

42. Chapter 42

Summary for the Chapter:

Lonnie unsettles Joyce.

The group tries to recover after finding themselves in the Upside Down.

Notes for the Chapter:

I knew what they had to do after they got into the Upside Down, at least at first, which I think makes sense, maybe.

October 17

“Joyce. Good. You're home.”

She blinked, regretting ever picking up the phone. She was supposed to be out the door, and she would be late to work. She shouldn't have stopped to grab it, but she had, and that was her mistake. She did not need this now. Did not need him.

“What do you want, Lonnie?”

“Joyce, what kind of a greeting is that?”

The only polite one she could think of, really. She wanted to tell him to go the hell away and let her get to work, but the boys were in the house, and she didn't want to fight with Lonnie while they could hear her. She'd done it too many times before, and this time it wasn't necessary. She wasn't trying to get him to step up for his son's birthday. This wasn't that important, she was sure of that.

“Lonnie, I'm late. I need to go. I have to work. Make it quick.”

"I was thinking I'd come up this weekend, see the boys."

"What?" Joyce could only frown when she heard that. Lonnie never wanted to see his sons. He barely acknowledged their existence and usually only when they were in the same room. Sometimes not even then. Him calling out of the blue like this was weird. Too weird. It didn't seem real.

"You know, it's been a while since I've seen them," Lonnie went on, and Joyce's stomach twisted up in knots. She knew that wasn't true. She knew him better than that, and she knew he was lying. She didn't know what he was after, but she knew it wasn't time with the boys.

"It has, but I don't—"

"I've got work this week, but I'll be free on the weekend. I can drive up and see them."

The bastard knew she had double shifts all weekend, like always. He used to do a lot of his whoring around when she was working, leaving the boys to fend for themselves. "I can't talk about this right now."

"Just—not today. I need to work. I have to go."

"Come on, Joyce. It's not—"

"I have to go," she insisted, hanging up the phone. She was not about to do this now. She had to get to work. She refused to be late over Lonnie Byers, of all people.

She grabbed her keys off the table, picking up her cigarettes.

"Who was that?"

She winced when she saw her niece. She had a sinking feeling that she was seeing the reason Lonnie had called. The real reason, that was. "My ex."

"Oh."

"It's not important. How are you feeling?"

Her niece shrugged. She went to the table and sat down. "Fine."

"You're sure? I know we didn't get a chance to talk after you were at school—"

"Fine."

Joyce didn't have time to fight with her, either, so she forced a smile and headed toward the door, promising both of them they'd talk later.

"What's your dad like?"

Jonathan looked over at his cousin, frowning. He hadn't expected that question, of any of them. He hadn't seen his dad in years, not since he took off, since he never bothered to disappoint him the way he always did Will, and he hadn't thought Veronica knew or cared about him.

"Why?"

"He called. Seemed to upset your mom."

Jonathan wasn't surprised by that last part. His father's existence upset his mom, though she'd picked him, and a part of that she could only blame on herself. He knew, logically, that if she'd made other choices he and Will wouldn't be here, but he still would rather have almost anyone as a father instead of Lonnie.

"He called?"

"That's who she said it was. Would she lie?"

He shook his head. He didn't know why she would have, since there was no one in his mom's life to lie about. She worked too much for that, and even if she was trying to cover it up, picking his dad as the caller would be stupid. No one would believe that because he didn't care about any of them.

He'd have given them away if he had any choice in the matter. Jonathan was sure of that.

"No. It's not a lie. It's just not like him. He doesn't give a damn about us. Never has. Won't even show up for Will's birthday like he promises, even when he picked what they were doing."

"He won't come here."

"I don't think so," Jonathan said. He stopped, studying her. "Are you... worried about him? I mean, he's... he's nothing. He gets drunk, he yells... but he's not here. He's not going to come. He's not."

Veronica nodded. "Okay."

"Are you sure you are? You've been pretty upset since that night when you were out in the rain," he said. He didn't know how else to say it. She'd seemed better, but then she got worse again. And he wanted to help, but he didn't know how. He'd done what he could when he took her to school, but that wasn't enough. None of it was.

"Fine."

"I've got a shift later," he said, still watching her. "Will might be around. I haven't heard anything about him going to his friend's house today. He usually is at Mike's, but they might have a thing. I don't know. He's not talking to me as much these days."

Veronica sighed. "I don't need a babysitter."

He wasn't so sure she didn't, but he didn't say anything.

November 12

Brenner rounded the van, stepping past all the other agents. He'd been told that Eleven was here, and he'd wanted to be part of recovering her, ignoring Dyer's objections about it. He knew her opinion, and truly, if he ended up dead because he showed his face, she'd only be too pleased about it, so he saw no reason to deny her that moment.

Or himself the triumph of bringing Eleven back into the fold. He felt

certain if he had been the one to approach her before, he could have coaxed her back, unlike Dyer, whose murder of the restaurant owner had caused her to panic and run. She'd hidden successfully for days, and now it seemed she'd even made contact with Nine.

Nine would have filled her head with lies, but as they had seen in their video, Nine had almost died fighting that thing from the rift. He should be dead, by all rights, but Nine seemed to be stubbornly resilient, living when he should be dead not once but multiple times.

"Where are they?"

Dyer shook her head. "We don't know. The vehicles are all still here. None of them have left. We've got agents combing the woods and the outbuildings, but they're not in the house, not in the sheds, not in the cars."

Brenner gave her a look. "Are you suggesting they disappeared?"

"They weren't close enough to any of the cameras for us to have a clear answer."

"Are you suggesting that the agent who saw them drive in was mistaken?"

She shook her head. "I didn't say that. You can ask him again if you want, but he insists that both cars were full when they drove up. Yet one would think they couldn't be, not when they're missing."

"And yet we know that the van did not flip because it blew a tire," Brenner said. "That was Eleven. She did that."

"Yes. And now she is just as dangerous as Nine."

"You believe they both should die."

"I already did, but now you have proof. You've lost control of both of them, and they are too dangerous to be free."

Brenner shook his head. They didn't have anyone else they could use, and Eleven was proving even more the thing they wanted, so gifted with her mind. She'd flipped a van, and that was no small thing at all.

“How did they escape?”

Dyer folded her arms over her chest. “Nine.”

Brenner frowned. “Nine? He's fire. How could he have made them all disappear? Burned them in an instant?”

“He has been able to come and go undetected before. Why not now?”

“Please tell me he did not just strand us all here,” Hop said, not even sure where that kid was in this mess of people. That wasn't the easiest of rides, if you could even call it that, since it was almost a quick blink from one place to the next.

He remembered a bit of red, but that red was different from this. The darkness here was the same as what he'd seen in the lab. He had seen this before, these dark vines across the walls and ground, the thick flakes of something in the air, something he couldn't identify.

They weren't kidding about this place. It seemed to go on for miles, anywhere he looked.

“Like home, but not home,” the Wheeler kid whispered as he rose, looking back at Joyce's house. “This is it. This is the Upside Down.”

“No shit,” Sinclair said.

“Try holy shit,” Henderson said. “This is... kind of awesome.”

“Dude, there's something wrong with all this, and it is so not awesome,” Harrington said. “This place is... way beyond creepy. And... did you really say we can't get out of here?”

Hop grunted. Fact was, that kid pulled them in, and as far as he knew, the only other door was in the lab, and they weren't going to be able to walk out of there without getting dead. “He's still breathing, isn't he?”

“Yes,” Veronica said, “but just barely. Worse than when you brought him to the cabin. He should never have done that. We're too many. He might not wake up again.”

“And the girl?”

“She's better,” Joyce said. “Better than him, at least. She's awake. Just too tired to talk, I think.”

“This isn't safe,” Nancy said. “That thing could come back. And they need to rest. We can't stay outside like this. We need to do something. Quick.”

“We can get them inside,” Jonathan said. “Though I don't know that it's any better than out here.”

“It might be,” Henderson said. “Look at the ground.”

Hop did, frowning. He stepped forward, looking at the mark the kid had pointed out. The ground was scorched all the way around the house, at least from what he could see.

“It's a ward,” the Wheeler kid said, coming over to them. “He made a ward around the house.”

“Obviously it didn't work,” Sinclair said. “That thing has been going in and out of the house like crazy. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, but think about it, Lucas,” Wheeler said. “The fire ward would keep it back when they were burning. Not when he was out, and we know he's been in and out since Will went in there.”

“So he wasn't here to keep the fires going,” Nancy said. “But if we had them, if we could keep them going, you think that would keep the house safe?”

“Maybe.”

“I think it's worth doing,” Veronica said. “We have to do something to try and make it safe because he can't get us back out right now, and I don't think we can move him.”

“Not far,” Hop agreed. “All right. We need a place where these two can rest, and we need something we can burn. We're going to establish a perimeter with the fire to keep anything out of the house and protect everyone.”

"I don't think this is a boy scout situation where we can find dry wood," Harrington said. "This whole place is pretty darn... gooey."

"If he can burn it, so can we. We've got lighters. One of them can start a fire we can use to start the rest. Even if we only make stakes and space them apart across these marks, it's better than nothing," Hop said. "Fire keeps it back. That's what we know, and that's what we're going to use."

"What about Will?"

Hop almost swore. He knew that kid was the focus for most of the others here, but they couldn't afford to get sidetracked now.

"We secure this place, make it safe, and then we will make a plan to find Will. If he's not hiding here, then he's—"

"Castle Byers," Jonathan said, and Joyce stood, looking at him. "You think, Mom? That's where he'd go if the house and sheds weren't safe."

"Yes."

"Hold on one damned minute," Hop said. "I know we want to find Will, but think about it for a second. We have one gun here. One. Our real weapons, those kids, they're down for the count right now. We need to buy them some time, and that is why we are going to make this barricade. This isn't something we go rushing off into, not when we don't know what else might be out there. We set up a base, we make it secure, and then we scout ahead. Don't fight me on this. You won't win. I spent too long in Vietnam watching men die because of the stuff we didn't have a chance to prepare for, and this reminds me too much of that damned jungle."

"Hop's right," Joyce said. "We'll go after Will as soon as everyone else is safe. Let's start making those stakes. I want a good fire protecting this house and everyone in it."

"It's almost like a team," Veronica said, and Joyce looked over at her. She shrugged, and Joyce wondered if she was feeling guilty for not

being able to do more to help. She might not have died, but that overdose had strained her body, and she'd gotten tired faster than anyone, though Joyce was pretty sure Nancy was going on willpower alone. "All of them out there, doing their little tasks, putting things together like that."

Joyce nodded. "We all need to do something, and we all can right now, since there's still a lot left."

Veronica eyed the room uneasily. "I wish we could do a fire in here, clear it all out. These vines make me sick. Like I keep thinking they're going to attack us."

Joyce eyed them with the same unpleasant feeling. "I don't like it, either, but we need some kind of shelter, and this is the best we can do for now."

"Yeah."

"You know no one is judging you," Joyce told her. "Someone should be watching over those two, and we don't have a bunch of junk food for them to eat and recoup with here."

Veronica shook her head. "It's not that."

"Then what is it?"

"The drawings," Veronica said. "I keep expecting to see that thing here. Not the one without a face. The other one, the spider one."

Joyce frowned. "What spider one?"

"Forget it. It's stupid."

"Veronica," Jonathan said, poking his head inside the house. "You still have a lighter? Hopper's is out, and Mom's is nearly empty."

"Yeah, but maybe we should be lighting each stake off the others now that we've got some going," Veronica said, digging in her pocket to take out a lighter. "And don't take his, okay? If he wakes up, he'll need a way to make fire that doesn't hurt as much."

"I wasn't planning on it," Jonathan said as he took the lighter from her. "I just don't know how we'd pound the stakes down if they were already lit."

"Good point."

"I think you should tell me about the drawings," Joyce said. "What spider thing are you talking about?"

Jonathan stopped in the doorway, looking back at them. "Are we talking about Great Aunt Darlene's drawings? The ones she did to explain why 'death was everywhere' and tried to measure me—us—for a coffin?"

Veronica swallowed. "She showed you them, too?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Why? You... Oh, no. This isn't. It can't be. It's not that dark place she was talking about."

"I'm not so sure about that," Veronica said. "She told me it was all dead and dying. That's this place. And there was a monster, one worse than the one we've seen. She even said 'death surrounded' me. And it kind of has."

Joyce shivered. "No. That's taking her ramblings way too far. She was just... a bit strange, a bit... damaged. She was... well, she was crazy. Everyone knew it. I felt a bit sorry for her, but there wasn't much I could do. My parents were sick and then I had the boys and... she just had such a sad, lonely life, and I felt bad for her, but she was also very weird."

"If she found this place somehow when she was a kid, it would have messed her up good," Veronica said, running her hands over her arms. "It's creepy. And it is like those drawings. And he said there was something in us, a potential, the kind that the lab would have exploited. And if Great Aunt Darlene had it, maybe she saw more than she knew. Maybe she was like him and could open doors but didn't know it."

"I think you may be taking that too far," Jonathan told her. "And we have a lot of other stuff to worry about without adding that to it

when we don't know that she was anything more than crazy.”

Veronica nodded. “I know. I just... Why did you take Jonathan to visit her? Because I can't figure out why my mom would have ever taken me. Was she dying? Was that it?”

Joyce frowned, putting a hand to her head. “You know, I don't remember. I don't know why I would have gone, not when things were as bad as they were and I had my hands full trying to take care of the boys and work and Lonnie was useless, so... I don't know. I must have heard she wasn't doing well, I guess.”

“Look, I'm sure there was a reason, but we need to finish doing this so that the house is protected and we can go look for Will.”

“I'm not trying to delay you,” Veronica said. “I just... I have this unpleasant feeling like she might have been right about this, and if she is... there's something worse than the demogorgon out there.”

“God, I hope that's enough,” Joyce said, looking out the front window. Hopper put a hand on her shoulder, and she shivered. Veronica knew she was in part to blame, bringing up the stuff about her great aunt, but she didn't know how she could sit on that when everyone was doing their best to fight against the monster they knew.

They probably even thought this was safe. Sure, there were gaps in between the stakes, but without Jay awake to control a ground fire, no one wanted to risk setting one of those. The stakes would have to be enough, and they were pretty close together, close enough that it would be risky going through them.

A couple weren't lit. Yet.

They'd do that soon enough, she was sure, but they had promised to go looking for Will, so that had to happen, and they'd have to have a way in and out for it. She hoped wherever Castle Byers was, it wasn't too far, because the idea of splitting up and sending anyone even a little ways from here felt dangerous and wrong.

She wasn't moving far from her pyro, who was still breathing so

slowly she had to keep checking to be sure he was alive. Eleven was back up, following the boys and helping more than Veronica had, but she still came by to watch over him, too.

“I think we've done all we can here,” Hopper said. “We're as set up for the time being as we're going to get. Any change?”

Veronica shook her head. “He's still out. He'll probably be like this for a while. As far as I know, he's never pulled in any more than one person with him before, and this... this was a lot more than one person. Plus he was already weak.”

Hopper nodded. “I know. And I'm not trying to push. I just don't think we're going to get out safely from the other door if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, the lab would probably kill us,” Veronica agreed. She knew that no one wanted to believe they'd be trapped here if Jay didn't wake up, but it was a good possibility at this point. He could still have strained himself too far and they were going to be stuck here for a good, long time.

Assuming it didn't kill them first because the air was weird and it was cold. Everything here was dead, and they might just be if they hung around for long.

“Does this mean you're ready to go after Will?” Joyce asked. “Because I'd rather not wait any longer.”

“I don't intend to,” Hopper said. “I just wanted to make sure everyone here would stay safe if we did go. And no, this time we are not all going.”

“Kind of figured that when you made us build the flaming fence,” Barb said. “It's just going to be you and Mrs. Byers, right?”

“Yeah,” Hopper said. He didn't even try to talk Joyce out of going. “I want a couple of you to watch the gap in the fence we're going to use and light it if you hear that thing coming then get back inside.”

“I'll do that,” Jonathan said. Steve volunteered at the same time, not much of a surprise there. “I'd like to go after Will, but I understand

why it's better if we keep as much of us together as we can.”

“You're a smart kid. You all are,” Hopper said. “All right. Joyce and I are going looking for Will. We're checking one location where he might be, and then we're coming back. No one do anything stupid while we're gone. No running off, no games or tricks with superpowers, nothing that injures someone and gets a lot of blood going around. Nothing that will lure that thing here while we're gone. It's not worth the risk.”

“We know.”

Hop walked along with Joyce in silence. He'd made the speech to the kids, and he didn't regret it, but he wasn't sure what to say now. This could be just what they were hoping for, that they'd find Will—who definitely wasn't in the house or the sheds—but it might not be. He knew that it made sense to check this place that mattered to the kid in their own world, and they might get lucky.

Otherwise, they were back to asking Eleven for help, but she'd been too weak when they first came through, and he wasn't sure she was all that better, not yet. He also didn't like the idea of putting all of their hopes on these lab kids. They might have abilities they shouldn't, but that was just one more reason not to ask too much of them.

Not that he had any illusions about this torch in his hand being much good against that thing should it come back. He'd seen the kid barely force it back with a whole flame, and this wasn't even close to that, though he did feel a bit better having it along. If nothing else, he could burn that crap that seemed to be everywhere, much as it was probably crazy to think it was going to attack them.

“We'll need another way out of here,” he said, and Joyce looked over at him. “One that doesn't depend on the kid or the lab.”

She nodded. “I've been trying to think of one, but I don't see it. He can make doors. The monster makes doors, so maybe it might make one near us, but even if it does, how can we make it stay open long enough to get us out?”

"I don't know. Still, if it got part of us out, it might be worth it."

"Not if they're watching, and we know they are," she said. "If we go back, we walk into a trap. We're going to need more."

Hop grimaced. That wasn't easy to hear, but she wasn't wrong. "Then we need this kid to wake back up. We've bought time, but it might not be enough."

Joyce winced. "It has to be. We haven't come this far to lose now."

"Where is this castle?"

She pointed at head through the trees. They'd already gotten pretty damned close. "Will? Will, it's me. It's Mom. We're here, baby. We've come to find you."

"Mom?"

"Oh, baby," Joyce said, rushing toward the crappy hut. He didn't know how that had kept the boy safe at all, not when it seemed like it would fall down at any minute and the door was just a thin sheet. Joyce disappeared inside, and Hop found himself on the outside, feeling like an awkward fool.

He peered in to see Joyce holding Will in his arms. The kid looked a little blue, his skin wet like he was sweating despite the freezing temperature, and Hop thought he was probably sick.

"We should get him back to the house."

"Mom," Will whispered, his voice a low croak. Hop wasn't so sure the kid was going to make it. They'd taken too long to get here, and now he was in trouble. Damn it. Even if they got him back to the house, without getting him out of this place soon, they might lose him anyway.

Hop knelt next to her, careful of the torch. "I'll take him."

"They didn't tell us how long to wait," Steve said, and Jonathan gave him a look. "Come on. I know they didn't want to say anything in

front of the little ones, but let's be realistic, okay? There's a monster out there that they might not be able to stop with a gun. They're not inside the fire barrier. They're alone. And we don't know if they're going to find your brother. Are you thinking we'll do shifts if it gets late or what?"

Jonathan shook his head. "Look, they said they were searching one place and one place only. Castle Byers is in the woods behind our house. It's not that far. And if they're not back soon, then yeah... I know they're not coming back again. I just... Can we not talk about that right now?"

Steve grimaced. "Look, I'm sorry. I'm not trying to be insensitive. Just practical. We might need to light those last two stakes to keep everyone safe. It's not that I want to do it before your mom comes back, and I really do hope that they find your brother. I'm just trying to make sure everyone else stays safe."

"I know. If I didn't know that's what it was, I'd have hit you for suggesting they wouldn't come back," Jonathan told him. "And a few other things."

"I *did* apologize for the camera."

"I know that, too."

Steve figured Jonathan could use a bit of lightening up, though the fact that he was talking was actually something of an improvement. Sure, Carol's words were insulting, but they weren't entirely wrong—Jonathan barely spoke, at least not that Steve had seen. Now he was doing a lot more talking.

"I think Nancy's right, you know. This has changed all of us. I don't know if we can go back, and maybe we shouldn't, but we can at least work together."

Jonathan nodded. "We are. And if you must know... I think five more minutes at the most. I told you. It's not that far from here to Castle Byers. They should have been back already, but they're not. So I'm hoping the delay is that they found Will and not that they were caught by that thing, but I don't know. So five minutes, if we don't

see them, we light the stakes and we go back inside to wait.”

Steve grimaced. That was too short a time, really, but he knew as hard as it was, Jonathan wasn't lying about it. If that place was close and they weren't already back, it probably wasn't a good sign.

“There,” Steve said. “That's them, right? The fire?”

Jonathan looked out to the distance, searching for the light Steve had seen. “Mom?”

He was about to run out to her, but Steve grabbed him, holding him back. Jonathan started to yell at him, but he stopped as soon as they heard it. That thing, the monster, that was its clicking sort of noise, that weird sound it made.

“Oh, hell. It's back.”

“Mom, run!” Jonathan shouted. “It's here. It's coming. Run!”